

S. ARTHUR  
MARTIN



Hollenguard

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S. Arthur Martin

For Jami

My Cynosure

# 1

With a crack like thunder, the dragon roared. Glass shattered.

Kamil lowered his weapon with a grin, and his eyes quickly snapped from the remains of the broken wine bottle to his mentor, Nijal. The older man returned the smile, his eyes sparkling with pride.

“Good shot,” Nijal said with a nod.

“How far was that, thirty paces?” Kamil asked, looking down at his feet.

“Twenty. You couldn't hit me at thirty paces,” Nijal replied as he walked to the stump to inspect the remains of the base of a wine bottle that Kamil had shot. Red liquid stained the wood as it oozed along the surface and in rivulets down the sides to collect in the grass below. Nijal nodded with pride.

Kamil smiled at his mentor's play at mock derision and followed, turning the dragon over in his hand and handing it, handle first, to Nijal.

“Thank you for letting me shoot it,” the young man said earnestly. “And thank you for sacrificing a bottle of wine to give me a proper target.”

His mentor snorted as he took the weapon. “Bah! Only the Denshire folk call that wine. I call it ogren swill. But they bring a lot of business my way, so I have to stock the stuff. Get this cleaned up and come inside when you're finished, Kamil. It looks like we have visitors.”

Kamil followed Nijal's stare down the grassy hill to the edge of a forested grove that bordered their property to the west. Four figures, their cloaks worn and muddied at the hems from long travel, were

emerging from the trees and following the ruts of a wagon path towards them. Nijal turned and headed back inside his inn, the Inn at the Crossroads, where all roads in the wide land of lower Valice crossed. Kamil continued to stare. These were odd folk, and they were coming from the sparsely-used western paths. They had weapons, he could see that clearly; big weapons and grim faces.

“Hurry now, lad,” Nijal called from the door, leaving it open invitingly as he headed inside to tend the kitchen. Kamil imagined that the visitors would likely call for food and drink as he quickly grabbed the broken wine bottle base and fished the largest jagged pieces of glass from the dirt and grass around the stump. The red liquid darkened his fingers as he held the shards and looked up again. The travelers were closer now, their eyes fixed upon the two-story inn.

The Inn at the Crossroads had existed for seventeen years, and Kamil had lived there since he was a young boy. His father had introduced him to Nijal as the inn was first being opened to patrons, and the boy quickly found a job tending the stables when visitors arrived on horseback or upon the gangly cliffjumpers that the shirefolk of the north used as mounts. His duties soon expanded to maintenance in the inn itself, and over the years Kamil found himself escorted to the building more and more by his father and then left there for longer and longer stretches of time while the man was off on mysterious adventures. One time, his father simply never retrieved him. Nijal insisted that he knew nothing of where his father was and promised the boy he could stay as long as needed until he returned. That had been six years ago.

Nijal treated Kamil like a son, and over the years as the boy grew into an adult, he started tending to nearly the same number of responsibilities as the owner of the inn himself. It wasn't long before Nijal was letting Kamil greet the customers, retrieve eggs for the skillet, butcher ogren for meals, and keep track of the bookkeeping. But even at the times when the stoic older man was at his most relaxed, he was always quiet on the subject of Kamil's father. Kamil found that he could easily steer their conversations to Nijal's dragon, a weapon carved of a wooden handle and set with a long, metal barrel that ignited powder and fired round balls of lead. Kamil had only recently been granted the honor of shooting the weapon himself.

The travelers had reached the inn. Their expressions were grim, and they paid Kamil little heed as they passed him by while he stood

there with dripping hands filled with broken glass. The young man watched them pass. The first traveler was a tall man and very slender. A gust of wind spread the hem of his hood, and Kamil briefly saw ears that were long and tapered to points. A knife clinked against a metal brace at the end of his belt, and Kamil glanced down to see that the man favored a well-crafted suit of armor set with thick leather padding beneath his worn white cloak.

The second man wasn't quite as tall, but he was incredibly wide-shouldered. He was the only traveler who walked with the hood of his cloak down around his shoulders, and Kamil saw a square jaw covered with the scruff of a beard long since tended and a stern face framed by shaggy, raven-black hair. Kamil's eyes were drawn the most intently to the giant hammer that the man rested upon his shoulder. Its handle easily stretched five feet, and the business end of the weapon looked as though it could drive a man completely into the ground should its wielder decide to do so.

The third traveler, a younger and much shorter man, sniffed as he passed Kamil. He gave a cough, and though faltering slightly while he did so, he quickly skipped a step and caught back up to the others. There was little else Kamil could glean about the man as he passed besides the odd smell of spice, for his eyes quickly became fixated on the fourth visitor.

Elegant steps, completely soundless despite the gravel and dirt beneath them, brought this fourth visitor to the inn. She was lithe, and though cloaked and with her hood drawn tightly around her face, he could see many-colored stray locks of hair as they were picked up by the breeze and thrown behind her while she walked by. Her feet were covered in beautiful, hand-crafted moccasins with leather frills and feathers that gave them a distinctly tribal look. Her smell reminded him of standing amongst the flowers as the wind caressed them. She held a grace in her steps in the simple yet elegant way that she moved which captivated him.

The young man's curiosity at who this woman was and what had brought her here was instantly piqued. He watched her, her tightly drawn cloak framing her shape as she effortlessly hopped up the steps and disappeared into the inn, and then stared at the door where she had last been for a full minute before he realized what he had been doing. Quickly, he moved towards the rear of the building to dispose of the glass.

Kamil felt a cool breeze pick up as he approached the well between the inn and the stables. A glance to the west stopped him in his tracks. While the sky above the inn was a brilliant blue, with cotton ball clouds scattered sparsely here and there, the sky far to the west was dark. He squinted in the bright sunlight and stared intently at the horizon. It was unlike any storm front he had ever seen, with swells that seemed to snake down from the clouds like spindly fingers. It was only then that he noticed how quiet the afternoon had become. Where usually there were the bright sounds of fall and the happy singing of birds from the nearby grove at the base of the hill, there was now near silence. The only sound came from the wind rustling the grass around his feet and the clacking of one of the inn's rear window covers quietly moving against the wood. Clack, clack, clack. He hadn't noticed it until now.

Sneaking glances ever westward, he continued towards the well. He reflected on the fact that the inn had been uncharacteristically quiet lately in terms of business. Aside from a father and his daughter's very brief visit three days ago, the usual steady flow of travelers had all but dried up. The inn stood upon the safest paths between three villages and upon the trade roads leading from the harbor city of Elderbrook all the way up through the passes to the lands of Denshire. Even if people did not stop for vittles or a room for the night, Kamil often saw them traveling by and gave them a friendly wave.

With fall fast approaching, business should have been picking up. Nijal and he had already stocked the inn for the winter months. It wasn't unusual for travelers to rent a room for weeks or even months in the cold season. Rarely did travelers arrive as armed as the four that had just shown themselves. Kamil thought about the great hammer the strong, unshaven man had carried. He remembered the wear upon its business end, the chips and gouges in the fine metal that demonstrated that the hammer had seen battle. He wondered at where these four strangers had come from and his eyes again looked west, following the wagon ruts to the grove where they had first shown themselves, up over the tall birch trees and again to the roiling storm clouds far in the distance.

A slosh of water brought Kamil's attention back to the task at hand. He hadn't even remembered having turned the wheel to raise the bucket. He quickly washed his hands of the sticky wine, grabbed a

spare bucket to deposit the glass shards, and hurried back to the inn, allowing the bucket to free fall back into the depths with the whip-whipping sound of the rope and a distant, echoing splash.

He stood in the doorway and watched the travelers as they sat around a table in the center of the common room. Nijal was already serving two mugs frothing with the house beer to the tall man with tapered ears and the man who had carried the hammer, which now lay propped against the table with its lengthy handle reaching nearly as high as Kamil stood tall. All of the hoods of the cloaks were drawn back now, and the young man could see their faces much more clearly.

The tallest had chiseled features and black skin. His eyes were mere slits, chalk white and standing out against his skin in contrast. His dark hair was cropped tightly to his head; curled like cotton, Kamil thought to himself. He was saying something to the man across from him who had smelled like spices in a voice that was smooth, melodic, and very calming. He took a long pull from the beer he was served and nodded his thanks to Nijal, who smiled cordially back before returning to the kitchen.

A gust slammed the door shut behind Kamil and he nearly yelped in fright. The wind had picked up outside very unexpectedly. He could hear the window cover going cla-cla-cla-clack, slapping against the side of the inn much faster than before. All eyes had turned to him, and Kamil felt himself shrinking under their stern gazes. All four travelers seemed to assess him critically; their eyes boring into him not out of malice, but out of an odd sort of judgment. The woman, the one whose movements had so captivated him before, was quickest to turn her attention away again, affording him only a brief glimpse. With her hood down around her shoulders he could now see her hair tumbling down her back. It seemed as though it glowed with autumn colors, flowing like a waterfall that drew his eyes ever downward to the very tips. He felt entranced.

“Excuse me.”

Kamil looked up quickly. The others had turned their attention back to the table and to their drinks except for the man who smelled of spices, who was addressing him in a surprisingly deep voice for his stature.



“Excuse me,” the man repeated, “was that not wine I smelled outside as we passed?”

Kamil looked confused for a moment, his mind racing to catch up after having drifted miles away. He nodded quickly.

“Yes,” he said, “Denshire's finest.”

“A glass, please,” the man requested, and then looked towards the woman and asked, “for you as well?”

Kamil saw the woman shake her head, and he expected leaves to begin falling from her beautiful gold, red, and brown hair.

“Right away,” Kamil said, and moved towards the kitchen.

He stared over his shoulder, watching as the man who had requested the wine turned back to his companions. They were all speaking now, except for the woman, and each of them leaned earnestly into their conversation. Try as he might, he couldn't make out their words. He passed through the door to the kitchen and turned to look where he was going just in time to stop before he ran into Nijal and a heaping plate of steaming food.

“Eyes forward, lad,” Nijal cautioned when he noticed the young man's curious stare. “You don't want any part of those folk. Warriors, the lot of them. They have that look in their eyes. I've seen it countless times before. And battle has not long forgotten them.”

“Warriors?” Kamil asked, his eyes widening, “I think the shortest man is from Denshire. He asked for wine. I don't recognize the others.”

“Dark-skinned man is Ro. Very far from home. The Ro live far across the veil to the east. Only ever see folk of his ilk in Elderbrook, and usually they are mercenaries. Gentleman with the hammer is probably from the Westland or beyond. Men grow up rather large out that way, and for good reason.”

“What of the woman?” Kamil asked, and immediately knew that his expression had alerted Nijal to the growing curiosity he'd been feeling towards her.

“D'wammish look about her,” Nijal answered, and his eyes darkened. “Best avoid her especially, Kamil. A beauty she may be, aye, but her folk are from a place far beyond our understanding.”

“D'wammish...” Kamil turned to look over his shoulder at her again, but Nijal kicked his shin. The young man yelped more in surprise than in pain.

“Look, lad. Go fetch that gentleman's wine, then go clean up the stables and shut the doors before the wind makes a mess of the place.”

“Ow, Nijal! Clean the stables? Are you joking? We haven't had a use for the stables in weeks!”

“Go on now,” Nijal said, and brushed Kamil aside as he moved into the common room with the travelers' food.

Kamil muttered his disapproval and turned to hop down the steps into the wine cellar. Nijal was never this glum about guests, particularly when they were just about the only business they'd seen in a while. Though the older man's words had been meant to quell his curiosity, he found that they had only caused it to swell to bursting.

By the time the stable had been thoroughly cleaned and the doors closed and tightly latched, the sun was starting to set. Its pallor was an odd brown through the swirling, dark storm that boiled on the western horizon, and Kamil ignored the cool whipping of the evening breeze that had picked up as he stared at it for a long moment. It was a haunting sight, something he had never seen before.

When he entered the inn again, only two of the strangers remained. His eyes quickly scanned the common room for the D'wammish woman, but she was gone. Nijal was sitting at the table with the two who were left: the man who had asked Kamil for wine and the tall, dark-skinned Ro with the tapered ears. Nijal looked up and caught Kamil's eye, then waved him over.

"Kamil," Nijal said, his face grim but friendly as he waved an arm in the Ro's direction. "This is Tol."

Tol stood, and Kamil had to look up to meet his gaze. The man's white eyes seemed to shine beneath his narrow eyelids as he looked down at Kamil and produced a pleasant smile. Tol's attention then shifted to Kamil's outstretched hand, and the young man realized that he had presented it to shake. The stranger wasn't accepting.

"He means no offense," Nijal said with a grin. "The Ro do not grasp hands in greeting as we do. It is reserved as a sign of respect before, or after, a battle."

Tol nodded and addressed Kamil in his pleasant, deep voice. "Though, I am grateful for your inn and hospitality," the Ro said. "I consider it a pleasure to have met you and your father here."

Kamil thought to correct the man about Nijal being his father, but simply nodded back instead. Tol sat again, the modest chair creaking to accommodate a man who was too tall for the comfort it was built for. Kamil's eyes swept across the table, past the near-empty mugs and empty pitcher with the foam from the ale it had carried still clinging

to the sides, to the other stranger. The man glanced Kamil's way as he sipped the last of his wine, then set it down and extended a hand with a smile.

“Quassia Amara,” the shorter man said as he introduced himself. Kamil took the hand and noticed for the first time the man's incredible shock of red hair. Curly, fiery red locks framed sharp cheekbones and a refined chin. He didn't seem like much of a warrior.

“Are you from Denshire?” Kamil asked. The man was slightly shorter than Nijal, and Kamil was familiar with shirefolk. They could be identified by their sharp features and, often, their long, red hair.

“Yes, sir,” Quassia said, “though I haven't seen home in many years. It looks as though I may never, now.”

Tol and Quassia exchanged a glance that made the shorter man hide his face in a sip of his wine glass, despite the fact that it was empty. Kamil felt a shiver at the shire man's comment, and from the look on Nijal's face the dire words had not escaped him either.

“Why don't you have a seat, Kamil?” Nijal said, and extended his foot beneath the table to kick out a chair. Kamil took another look around the common room.

“Shall I start a fire, first?”

Nijal shook his head. Kamil shrugged and took a seat. It was a warm day, and the common room felt comfortable without the fire, but the weather was strange. He was reminded of the odd storm on the horizon when he once again heard the window covering clacking against the wooden walls, punctuating an awkward silence that stretched for a few minutes before Kamil decided to break it with a question.

“How long will you be staying?”

“Until morning,” Tol said. “We have a pressing errand that drives us eastward, and we cannot delay longer than a night's rest and a full meal will allow.”

Tol glanced at the west window of the common room. It was

difficult to see outside with the lamps lit and the sun setting as it was, but the way his white eyes seemed to narrow it was obvious to Kamil that he was trying to do so, anyway.

“Will you be heading to Elderbrook then?” Kamil asked. He was curious as to what errand would drive such warriors further into the relatively peaceful heartland of Valice.

“Passing through it,” Quassia acknowledged. His voice was slightly slurred, as though the wine were getting to him. “But not staying. After all, we cannot delay longer than a night’s rest and a full meal will allow.”

Tol glared at Quassia, who quickly looked away. It was clear to Kamil that there was much hidden behind their motives. Quassia obviously didn’t agree with their decision not to make time for extended rest and accommodation.

“I apologize for our haste, Quassia,” Tol said, and he looked as though he genuinely meant it. “Were it within our means to stay here for the winter or in Elderbrook after we arrive, I would be the first to agree to such a plan.”

“Well,” Quassia answered, leaning forward, “I wouldn’t think of questioning your judgment on the matter. After all, look at where your leadership has gotten us.”

“You are welcome to go your own way,” Tol said.

“Am I, Tol? I had no idea.”

Tol’s eyes flashed with anger. Quassia sneered and poked at his empty wine glass, setting it slightly on edge and then watching it as it tottered back and forth on the wooden table. The tension between the two travelers was making Kamil uncomfortable. Quassia sighed and changed the subject.

“Do you have family or friends in Elderbrook, Kamil?”

Kamil hesitated with his answer. He had lived in Elderbrook with his father throughout his childhood. It was a bustling city at the northeastern edge of Valice, with a port that serviced ships bound for

trade and exploration. His fondest memories were staring out across the veil, a great expanse of mist that bordered Valice to the east. He would often sit for hours watching the veilrunners as they set sail for distant lands. When he was left with Nijal for long stretches of time, he would imagine that his father had been a captain on a runner and, even now, was still out upon the veil, braving its dangers to visit some exotic land.

He had met many children in Elderbrook, most of whom belonged to families that tended the outlying farms. Called the Tiers, these farms were spread all along the western hills of Elderbrook and grew produce and livestock. Kamil's childhood was spent with these boys and girls running along the Tiers, getting lost in mazes of corn and wheat, chasing ogren and tending livestock for an allowance of silver coins. Since his life had begun here at the inn with Nijal, he had mostly forgotten all of them. His home was at the Inn at the Crossroads, not in Elderbrook.

"No," Kamil answered after realizing he had thought about the question overlong.

Quassia nodded lightly, staring at Kamil with caring eyes as though he was aware of the young man's reverie about his past. After another stretch of silence between the four, Tol stood up. Nijal quickly stood in response.

"We must be getting rest," the big, dark-skinned Ro said, apologetically. "We will have another chance to visit tomorrow morning before we leave. Goodnight, and thank you both again."

"Goodnight, Tol." Nijal said. The sound of his mentor's voice was startling to Kamil. The voices of these strangers, particularly Tol, had been so melodic and tinged with exotic accent. By contrast, Nijal's voice was hard and gruff.

Quassia quietly followed Tol up the steps. Their footfalls could be heard along with the creaks of the sturdy floor directly above Kamil and Nijal's heads as the travelers found their beds. It was only a few minutes before the inn was quiet once more.

"Help me with these dishes, would you, Kamil?"

Nijal grabbed a plate and the pitcher from the table. Kamil assisted him by grabbing both mugs and the wine glass and followed his mentor into the kitchen. Nijal silently set the dishes by the wash basin while Kamil went to work, then watched his foster son for a long time, his thoughts racing, waiting for a good time to speak. Kamil beat him to it.

“Nijal. There's something odd about those folk.”

“Agreed,” Nijal said with a firm nod of his head. “We don't often see warriors heading east out of the wildlands, only westward into them... the fools.”

Nijal started grabbing the dishes Kamil had finished cleaning and putting them in their respective places with light clinking sounds.

“No,” Kamil said, “I mean about the way they are acting.”

Nijal nodded again. He had sensed it too. The two worked in silence until the dishes were finished. Kamil turned and leaned against a counter, drying his hands with a dishtowel and watching Nijal as they both thought about the day's events. He broke the silence with some other news.

“A storm is brewing in the west. A dark one. It colored the sun as it set.”

“Aye, I saw it,” Nijal said, “and yet the clouds are borne by the wind to the north. Surely it will pass us by.”

“It was on the horizon for the entire day,” Kamil said, remembering his many glances westward as he had cleaned the stables in the building wind. “It was as if it were the evidence of a great wildfire that burned there. But the clouds seemed to stretch downward from the sky, not upwards.”

Nijal cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. His eyes moved up and to the left, to the right, and Kamil knew that meant the old man was thinking long and hard about something. After a long moment, Nijal looked his way again.

“Bring in wood for a fire after all, Kamil. I believe the inn may

grow cold in this weather. It is nearing winter, after all.”

Kamil nodded and walked outside. The wind was steadily blowing now, and Kamil was thankful that he had chopped plenty of wood earlier in the week and piled it alongside the inn's back wall. He grabbed some logs and hurried back into the common room. Nijal was there, staring out the same west-facing window. Kamil set the logs down next to the fireplace and headed back outside to the yard retrieve some more.

The sky was completely dark and the stars twinkled brilliantly above him as he stole a glance upward. The ribbons of the Pike, two great rings that split the heavens high above as they stretched from horizon to horizon, glowed softly with collected sunlight. One wide and silver, the other slim and gold, they forever flowed across the sky; and though dim during the day, they shone at night and lit the world while the sun slept. He was so enraptured with the clear sky and the brilliant Pike that he walked right into the wood pile, toppling many logs and causing them to spill out into the yard. When he stooped to retrieve one of them, something caught his eye.

Kamil looked up past the overhang of the first story of the inn and saw the woman who traveled with Tol and Quassia. She was sitting upon the roof outside of her open window, leaning back against the wood and allowing the whistling wind to pick up her autumn locks and cause them to dance around her face. Her cloak was gone, and for a moment Kamil worried that the woman might be cold in such weather. She looked comfortable - no, she looked to him to simply be at peace.

Her body was lithe, her limbs long and graceful. He noticed her fingers as she clutched her legs just below their knees, drawn up as they were to her chest. They were longer than his, and elegant. Her feet were still protected in the well-crafted moccasins he had noticed earlier. Her eyes were turned upwards, as his had been, to the Pike that circled the world in the heavens.

He stood a long moment simply watching her, one log at his feet and the other loosely hanging in his arms. He thought that at any moment she would notice him there, but she did not.

“Hello!” Kamil called loudly enough for the wind to not carry his greeting away with it.



The woman turned her head and looked down at him with dark eyes. She smiled, and he relaxed a tension in his body he hadn't realized he'd been carrying.

"Hello," she replied in a voice that was surprisingly soft, and yet reached him despite the weather. Kamil stared awkwardly as she returned his gaze. She didn't say anything else, but just watched him with that smile, her hair still dancing in the wind.

"What's your name?" Kamil shouted, feeling suddenly as though he shouldn't be raising his voice but concerned she would not hear him if he didn't.

The woman stared for a long moment. Kamil wondered if perhaps she hadn't heard his words. Or perhaps she wasn't comfortable giving him that information. He suddenly felt ashamed. Throughout the day he had been so enraptured with finding out who these travelers were that he had lost all sense of manners. He opened his mouth to apologize.

"My name is Elysandria," the woman said in her quiet voice. Her dark eyes sparkled as though she enjoyed stating her name. "It's nice to meet you. You have a beautiful inn."

"Thank you!" Kamil shouted, wondering at how he could hear her so clearly. The wind had picked up to a dull roar around him and his cheeks stung from the cold. The woman nodded and turned her eyes upwards once more. Kamil crouched and grabbed the errant log, looked up at her again, then hurried inside.

He wondered if he should offer an overcoat to the woman. He had a spare in his room and it was a cold night. It wasn't long before he dismissed the thought of going upstairs and knocking on her door as being rude, especially if the big man with the giant hammer had anything to say about it.

These people were strangers to him, but their foreign natures were intoxicating. He thought of Tol and his dark skin and bright, oddly shaped eyes. Of Quassia and the lush lands of Denshire that he had only heard about in Nijal's stories and from travelers from the north. His mind wandered to the mysterious, gruff man with the hammer,

the biggest weapon he had ever seen in his many years tending to travelers at the inn. He thought of Elysandria, too. He thought of her sparkling dark eyes, her soft voice, her hair that seemed like a river of falling leaves, and now her name.

With a heavy sigh, he placed the logs at the fire. He noticed the two that he had brought in earlier were gone. Through the window, outside in the front yard, smoke billowed from the cellar chimney and he heard the strike of a hammer meeting iron muffled by the floor and earth beneath him. He knelt to light a fire and pondered the sound. Despite the many mysterious happenings of the day, the fact that dawned on him was the most curious of them all.

Nijal was at his forge.

The first thing that Kamil did in the morning was to throw on his coat and run outside. His footfalls likely woke the rest of the inn, but that was the furthest thing from his mind. He was curious. He had to see if the storm was still there.

Nijal was not in the kitchen like he usually was. Kamil probably would have stopped to consider that odd, but he was far too preoccupied with running out the door. Leaving it open, he stopped just outside and stared westward. A nip in the air caused him to draw his coat tighter around his body, but little else went through his mind except wonder.

The storm was closer, and larger. It was the most incredible and altogether frightening thing he had ever seen. The clouds seemed to burn with an inky blackness, rolling up and in on themselves in a very unnatural way. They seemed wispy, like cotton balls pulled too thinly apart. The dark tendrils stretching from ground to sky that he had noticed the day before were also present, like long disembodied fingers reaching up to rake the boiling clouds.

He had a thought and quickly stepped out from the door, looking up past the overhang of the roof that surrounded the second story of the inn. She wasn't there. He took a walk around the building just to be sure, but he didn't see her. As he passed the window with the loose covering he realized it wasn't making any noise, and it was then that he noticed that the wind had died completely from the stormy gusts of yesterday. The clack, clack, clacking was absent. He remembered hearing it in the distance as he went to sleep, a sound so muffled that you wouldn't even notice it unless you were aware that it had to be there. It had kept him up.

When he returned to the common room, three of the visitors were awake and present. Tol stood at the west window, looking out at the approaching storm. Quassia, dressed in the fine attire that most shirefolk preferred to wear, was fussing in his bag while he sat at a table with the man who carried the hammer. That man, though incredibly gruff looking and whose hair looked to Kamil to be more

chaotic than the approaching storm clouds outside, had a great big smile to greet Kamil when he saw him.

“An early good morning to you,” the hammer-bearing man said in a jovial tone. “I do not see the proprietor about, so could you please fix us a decent breakfast? We must be heading on our way very soon.”

Tol turned and acknowledged Kamil with a tilt of his head. The young man nodded his assent to the men and headed towards the kitchen. He heard the gruff man's voice follow him.

“Mind, make it a large one, young sir. We carry quite the appetite.”

“You mean *you* carry quite the appetite,” Kamil heard Quassia say. “If it weren't for the circumstances I'd just as soon have dropped you off at the last village to save our coin purse from such unnecessary food expenditures.”

Kamil heard a laugh and that the gruff man had replied, but he did not hear what was said. For a long time he toiled in the kitchen, throwing eggs in a large pan with strips of ogren meat. He browned bread and served it to the men as an appetizer along with juice and a helping of Nijal's best pecan jam. While Tol ate his food dispassionately, Quassia and the hammer-bearing man seemed to thoroughly enjoy the jam and the juice.

As he cooked, Kamil wondered where Nijal had run off to. The cellar door was shut, and at one point he verified that it was latched between turning the ogren strips over in their sizzling pan. Nijal hadn't tended forge since... well, Kamil couldn't even remember. It had been years ago.

The food was almost ready, so Kamil hurried out to the common room with three plates. He nearly dropped them when he saw Elysandria sitting amongst the others. The three men talked around her, paying her little heed in their conversation. And yet the pale-skinned, lithe young woman wore a bright smile and turned her head to watch each of them as they spoke. She seemed happy just quietly listening to the conversation.

Kamil returned to the kitchen to grab a fourth plate and then set

them out around the table. Thanks were murmured his way in between a friendly debate about spiced potatoes. Quassia seemed particularly passionate about the subject, and Kamil guessed that the shire man was a bit of a culinarian himself. It made sense. The stories he had heard from Denshire often had many references to the exotic, often sweet tasting local cuisine there.

Kamil served the eggs and ogren strips to all of them and filled their glasses with juice. He left the table in order to be polite and fussed around in the kitchen and common room, idly cleaning things that really didn't need to be cleaned. The men all ate like savages, and he saw them taking most of what had been served to Elysandria off of her plate for themselves, but never without politely asking. She would simply nod and beckon for them to go right ahead, and the most Kamil saw her enjoy was two small sips of the wine. Both times she did indulge in the drink she would smack her lips in appreciation of the taste, and that made Kamil smile softly to himself.

Nijal never showed. Eventually, the meal was finished and the four travelers were standing and donning their cloaks. Packs were slung over shoulders with long sighs and heavy grunts. Tol approached Kamil and handed him a large sum of silver coins. The young man tried to object that it was far too much, but his objection was waved away.

"Thank you, truly, for your hospitality, Kamil." Tol said graciously. His eyes, as difficult as it was for the young man to judge because of their stark white color, seemed almost melancholy. If Kamil had to guess, he would say that the man really didn't want to have to leave.

They began filing out the door, Tol in the lead, followed by the man with the hammer, Quassia, and finally Elysandria.

"Live a long life," the man with the hammer said, smiling down at Kamil with a bit of a glint in his eye. Kamil thought to tell the man that Nijal was a decent barber and that if he waited a while he could take care of the mess of hair on his head, but he held his tongue. He didn't want to be rude.

"And live happy every day," Quassia added, stopping to shake Kamil's hand firmly, "for a long life is never a guarantee."

Kamil felt a shiver just as he had the night before. He watched Quassia step out of the door, and then felt a shock of nerves as Elysandria paused in front of him. She stared out the door at the others after they left and stood silently a long moment before she turned her attention to Kamil and favored him with a smile. Despite the gesture, her eyes, like Tol's, seemed sad.

After a long moment of hesitation she spoke, and the words seemed to surround him. They were not words of a language he was familiar with. Images began appearing in his mind, as if the way she addressed him was less through words and more through a chorus of ideas. He listened with his head tilted to the side and tried to make sense of the rush of images and emotions. When Elysandria had finished and he finally spoke, it felt to him as if he was interrupting something, though she had long since finished speaking.

"I don't understand," was all that he could manage to say. Elysandria nodded, her smile gone.

"I wish I could have told you," she said.

Her words instantly haunted him, but before he could think to press her for the meaning behind them, she had left his home. Kamil stood in the yard and watched the travelers until they passed over the eastern hill and down into Kevtin Valley and the tall, elder forests of trees that grew in abundance there. After a while, he strolled around the inn and sat upon the stump that he had used for target practice the day before. He stared at the storm for what felt to him to be at least an hour. Though it had gotten closer overnight, he couldn't see that it was advancing any further. The look of it, however, the horrible, roiling, almost hungry look of it, became increasingly terrifying to him the longer he stared.

Kamil eventually stood and looked around for Nijal, even knocking on the locked cellar door, before he finally decided to take his mind off of his mentor's absence, the storm, and the strange visitors in order to clean and put away the dishes. When Nijal still hadn't shown up, he also deposited the silver they had received in their hidden lockbox and entered the visit and payment into the inn's books.

Just as he finished writing, Nijal appeared. He had obviously been in the cellar, and his shirt was damp with sweat. He had definitely

been working, but Kamil hadn't noticed any smoke coming from the chimney as he had the night before.

“Visitors gone?”

“Yes, Nijal. What have you been doing all morning?”

His mentor ignored the question. “Good,” he said. “Start cooking up a lot of ogren strips and retrieve a bag of salt from the shed.”

“What?” Kamil was surprised, “Why do you...”

“Please, Kamil, just do it,” Nijal interrupted. “I will be upstairs.”

Kamil watched the man turn and walk away through the common room and then disappear up the stairs. He was mystified as he retrieved two handfuls of ogren meat, threw them on a pan, and fired up the oven again before stepping outside.

As he walked across the yard, his thoughts turned inward to his life at the inn and how different this autumn had been from every autumn before it: the lack of visitors, the strangeness of the last ones to have arrived, and how both they and the father and daughter from earlier in the week had not stayed long as so many often do in these months. Visitors usually stayed for more than an overnight rest and breakfast in the morning. Business was down, though Tol's' generous payment was equal to the income of two weeks of patronage.

Usually, Kamil had enough time during visits to be able to get to know those who stayed in his home. They would be eager to share stories of the forgotten West, of trips over the mountains in the north to and from Denshire or the Silver Hills, of the political and social goings-on at Elderbrook, or the tournaments held every spring in Kevtin. The four visitors today were unlike any he had seen before, and he had not had a chance to ask them about their travels. Thinking of them as he approached the door to the shed where the salt was kept, he glanced to the east. His eyes went wide.

The storm! The storm had appeared in the sky east of the inn as well! It was close, boiling and frothing overhead, with three thin tendrils of inky darkness that extended upwards as though they were feeding the dark clouds.

Before Kamil knew it, he was running. His boots crunched and kicked the pebbles that made up the eastern road to and from the Inn at the Crossroads as he sprinted up and over the hill where the travelers had gone earlier that morning. As he ran, he stared at the sky.

Kamil kept running until his legs began to burn, but he did not allow himself a rest. There were moments where he questioned what he was doing, but in those moments he thought of the travelers. Their words of parting suddenly stung his heart. They had been veiled words of warning. Their demeanor the night before as they sat in the common room came into focus. They had been nervous. They were journeying away from the storm and yet it had found them, appearing from nothing in the blue skies above the very paths they took to flee from it. Kamil was sure that all of this was true, and he was determined to find them and to warn them; perhaps even to save them. They could return to the inn with him. Nijal would know what to do. He always knows exactly what to do.

As Kamil ran further into the valley, ever closer to the storm, he began passing into a forest of tall birch trees. Their thin white trunks were like countless ribs dotting the landscape. Their golden canopies obscured the sun, the sky, and the storm. The path seemed to narrow ever further and the trees felt more and more as though they were closing inward on him. The thought crossed his mind that his path would eventually disappear completely.

He passed into a clearing in the trees, and that was when he saw the devastation.

The soil was black, and the stark white birch trunks had taken on the shapes of terrifying, blackened claws reaching upward towards their canopies. All of the leaves had fallen from the branches as though a great force had violently shaken them free. They lay everywhere before him in misshapen piles. It was eerily quiet, and the quiet was sharply disturbed when Kamil took a step forward, his boot crunching on the dead, dry leaves.

He found Quassia first. The man lay on his back half-covered by the fallen leaves. There was no need to check on him. His face was frozen in a terrible expression of abject horror. His eyes, however, were the most mysterious and frightening to look at. Where before



there was a sparkling life to them, a slyness and intelligence, Quassia's eyes were now completely black. What's more, wisps of dark vapor emanated from the sockets, meandering upward like the smoke from a candle that had just been blown out. Kamil followed the wisps with his eyes. They snaked up and up, high into the sky and through the twisted, leafless canopy of the birch above him before they disappeared into the terrible storm that quietly roiled overhead.

Kamil's boots crunched as he passed the poor, dead man from Denshire. He scanned the leaf piles and looked closely through the densely packed, scarred and blackened birch trunks. It was Tol that he found next. Even in death, Tol had the same air of calmness about him. Unlike Quassia, Tol lay curled up on his side clutching his stomach. Kamil knelt and looked the man over but saw no wounds, only the same inky blackness to his eyes and the same terrible wisps of vapor that lifted up into the sky. Nearly concealed by leaves nearby was his knife, and Kamil reached down to slip his fingers around the hilt of the weapon. It was so cold to the touch that he nearly dropped it.

He crouched low and held the knife with both hands as he scanned the dead trees all around him. He wasn't looking for any danger. Rather, it was sound that he listened for. Any sound. But there was none. All about him the world was still and lifeless save the wisps of vapor coming from the dead men's eyes and the circling black clouds high above him. Even the wind dared not disturb the leaves.

The man with the hammer was easy to find. Two birch trees lay fallen, their trunks shattered at waist height. Between them lay the giant man, his cloak splayed out behind him, his face locked in a grimace as though he had died suddenly in battle. The man looked angry and defiant in death, and the black vapor flowing from his sockets only added to the impression. One of his big hands still clutched the hammer, which had obviously been valiantly swung at whoever - whatever - had done this to him. Kamil guessed that the two shattered trees had been felled by powerful strokes of the weapon.

Elysandria was nowhere to be found. Kamil walked a circuit of the devastated battleground but saw no sign of her. She may have safely fled, he thought, and was hopeful. She had seemed kind. They all had, truly. Nobody deserved a fate such as this. Kamil felt a cold terror as he stood amongst the devastation beneath the unnatural storm in the

sky and began to worry for his own safety. Before leaving, he quickly returned to the hammer, shoved Tol's knife behind his belt, and reached down to pick the giant weapon up and take it with him.

He saw, then, nearly hidden in the leaves right beside the bulk of the man who had wielded the hammer, one of Elysandria's moccasins. He gasped and knelt, pushing at the man fiercely until he managed to pitch the heavy body up on its side. There she lay, her skin pale and her eyes tightly shut. Her autumn-colored hair mixed with the birch leaves strewn all around her so completely that it was impossible for Kamil to see where it ended and the leaves began. He looked down at her sadly, remembering her kind face the last time he had seen her alive. He wished now that he had ignored his conscience and spoken more with her the night before. He wished he had learned more about this woman from a distant land, who had met her end far too early in life and so far away from her home.

When she coughed, he leapt with surprise. She was alive! Her eyelids fluttered and she coughed again. She was obviously in pain. He crouched and touched her face, and her eyes quickly opened. She started to scream in her own language, and to him it felt as though his mind were screaming as well. Dark images flooded his thoughts. He desperately tried to calm her down.

"You are going to be all right. Please, be calm," Kamil said, lifting her shoulders and holding her tightly. She grasped at him, wanting to feel something real and something warm and alive. Her breathing slowed. She looked around desperately, her eyes filled with fear.

"We have to go. It's not safe here," Kamil said, returning her errant moccasin to her foot. She stared dumbly as he slipped it on. "I will take you back to the inn."

Elysandria lifted her dark eyes to Kamil's. Her expression was so vacant that he wondered if she had even understood him. When she pressed her face against his chest and grabbed him around the neck, he knew that she had. Gingerly, he lifted her to her feet. She never let go of him as he took a few steps. He was relieved to see that she, though needing his support, managed to walk on her own.

Elysandria lifted an arm and spoke a word that the young man couldn't understand, a word tinged with a heavy accent. Kamil followed her outstretched arm and saw that she was reaching for the

hammer.

“I don’t know if I can carry it,” Kamil said.

She repeated the word, and he heard the despair in her voice. Still supporting her with his shoulder, he reached down and attempted to lift the heavy weapon. It wasn't until he slid his hand up under the cheek of the hammer, where the handle met the large, weighted end, that he could lift it with a grunt.

She spoke another word quietly and leaned once more against him. He knew what that word meant. She was saying thank you.

Kamil hefted the big weapon so that he could lay it upon his shoulder. With Elysandria supported by his other arm, he began to lead her in a slow walk to the west, up and out of Kevtin Valley and back towards the Inn at the Crossroads.

Nijal stared at the hilltop east of the inn, his eyes occasionally flicking upward to take in the sight of the sudden storm that had appeared overhead. He knew in his heart that Kamil had gone that way and hoped desperately that the young man would show himself soon. If not, he would go after him, but just in case he was wrong he decided to stay at the inn for at least a little while. Kamil could just be out in Fox Grove taking a stroll. The young man frequently did so when travelers left and the inn was empty again.

Kamil was Nijal's child as far as the innkeeper was concerned. When the boy's father had left him at the inn for the last time, something in the way the man spoke made Nijal think that, this time, he wouldn't be coming back. He had always joked that he was looking for his "last great adventure" and after seven long years of being absent, Nijal believed that the prophetic words had finally come to pass. He felt an ache in his shoulder and shifted his weight, adjusting the two large packs that were strapped to his back. He was carrying enough supplies to last four solid weeks on the road.

After the strangers had arrived at the inn and after having seen the horrible storm on the horizon and listening to their desperate desire to continue eastward, Nijal knew that he and Kamil had to leave the inn as soon as possible. As he stared at the storms to the east and to the west he realized that the lack of business lately was no coincidence, even if he didn't understand what the dark clouds truly heralded or what danger they posed. He cursed the luck of the heavens that the storm had appeared in the east along the path the travelers would have taken when they left that morning, and then he cursed the fearless curiosity of his foster son. Of course the boy would run after them, Nijal thought to himself. Kamil would run into the inn as it were burning to cinders if he thought his mentor was inside. Despite the older man's anger and his worried heart, he managed a smile at that thought.

When Kamil appeared at the top of the hill, Nijal dropped most of his packs and broke into a run. Kamil crouched down and sat Elysandria back against one of the many tree stumps that adorned the

hilltop, and then dropped the giant hammer and his own rump to the ground to rest. The young man watched Nijal hurrying up the hill and felt relief wash over him.

“Is she all right?” Nijal asked as he approached. “What happened?”

Nijal uncorked a waterskin and held it up to Elysandria's mouth. She opened her eyes and accepted the offer thirstily, drinking for a while with Nijal's aid. She eventually reached out with slender fingers to hold the skin herself as she took large gulps of the contents.

“Her companions are dead. The storm...” Kamil glanced at the storm that still pivoted above Kevtin Valley a few miles away. “Something about the storm killed them.”

Elysandria stopped to take a breath. Both men looked at her, but she paid them no mind. She raised the waterskin again and continued to drink.

“She hasn't spoken much, and when she has it's been in another language. Nijal, I think we should get her inside.”

“There's no time for that.”

Kamil heard something in the tone of Nijal's voice and looked up at him. The dark look in his eyes told Kamil all he needed to know.

“We're leaving.” Kamil said in understanding. Nijal nodded.

“I've already packed supplies,” the innkeeper said. “Can she walk?”

Elysandria stopped drinking and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then replaced the cap and offered the waterskin back to Nijal. He noted as he took it that it felt nearly empty. The woman had been very thirsty.

“I can walk,” Elysandria said. “We must escape.”

Nijal began to lay out his plans. “If we make haste we can reach

Elderbrook in a week, even with taking a circuitous route around the storm to the east.”

“We can't go east,” Elysandria said. She stood slowly and both men stood with her. Kamil reached out to her to ensure she could manage the attempt without a fall, but she declined his aid with a polite wave of her arm. Her dark eyes flashed as she looked first at Nijal, and then at Kamil.

“We will die if we go east,” she said firmly.

The young man nodded and turned to his mentor. “Those men were slaughtered by something unnatural, Nijal. I saw no sign of what did it to them. She may be speaking the truth.”

“There is no other road,” Nijal said.

“What about Denshire?”

“Denshire...” Nijal thought a long moment as he turned to gaze at the distant mountains to the north. “It would be a difficult route.”

“We can make it,” Kamil asserted with confidence. Nijal had to smile. Aside from riding in a wagon to and from Elderbrook with his father, the young man had never traveled further from the inn than the village of Kevtin only a few miles to the east. He had no idea the journey he was in for.

“All right, Denshire. We will have a good vantage at the top of the pass. We'll get a chance to see just how big this storm is from there.”

Nijal turned and walked back to the inn. Kamil made sure Elysandria was steady on her feet, hefted the giant hammer, and followed his mentor with the woman trailing behind. Kamil ran inside to gather any belongings he may wish to take along while Nijal refilled the waterskin that Elysandria had drained and retrieved his heavy packs. Elysandria offered to carry some of the burden, and Nijal passed her enough so that she could feel as if she were contributing without loading her down with so many supplies that it would tire her during their steady march northward. He had packed smart, and knew that he could handle the load he had already given himself.

When Kamil returned outside he found Elysandria in their yard, staring east to the place where her fallen companions still lay. The waterskins and packs she'd been given to carry were laying around her feet, her slim fingers half-holding on to the strap of a belt pouch as it rested on a rock near her. He stepped up beside her and caught a sparkle of reflected sunlight on her wet cheeks. His heart ached for her loss.

"I'm sorry we cannot go back to bury them," he said.

"Tol would be furious with me if I did so," she replied in a soft voice, then crinkled her face into her best impression of Tol's usually stern expression. "Elysandria, you must not let your heart dull your instincts', he would say."

She turned to Kamil as she lifted packs and began securing them around her waist and over her shoulders.

"We are doing the right thing. They are gone."

Her eyes lifted upward over Kamil's shoulder, and he turned to see Nijal approaching them. The older man traded his foster son a few packs to carry and took the large hammer for himself. After one last check to ensure that they had everything, Nijal led the way northward along a well-traveled trade road without a second look back. Before Kamil could even process the significance of their departure, the inn had long been obscured behind the foliage and rolling hills behind them.

They traveled under the bright afternoon sunlight, exchanging little in the way of conversation. An autumn wind blew at their backs, seeming to urge them ever northward. Each of their thoughts had turned inwards, and each of the three silently respected their fellows by allowing them time to make peace with the changes that had suddenly driven the course of their lives in such a dramatically different direction.

As the day wore on, Kamil recognized less and less in the way of natural landmarks such as familiar trees and ponds. Eventually, he realized that he had never been this far from home. The hills and the trees and the rocks were all becoming foreign to him. He tried to picture how far they had traveled, imagining a map of lower Valice in his head. When they crested a tall rise and a brilliant, blue lake

appeared off to their left, sparkling in the sun that was already beginning its steady descent towards the western horizon, Kamil marveled that such a large body of water could have existed so relatively close to his home without him ever having seen or heard of it.

The road they followed veered ever closer to the lake until they were walking nearly at the water's edge. Nijal called a halt and packs were dropped with a mighty cacophony of thuds and long-winded sighs. Elysandria slipped off her moccasins and walked away from the men to the shores of the lake, dipping her feet into the cool water and resting back on the palms of her hands. Kamil sat with Nijal, who leaned his back against a tree and inspected the workmanship of the giant hammer curiously.

"I got this as well," Kamil said as he produced the slender knife from his belt. "It was Tol's."

The blade of the knife was widest at the hilt and tapered into a fine point after a subtle curve. Intricate designs were forged into the metal on both sides of the blade which looked like lettering in a language that Kamil did not recognize, but Nijal did.

"It is D'wammish," the innkeeper said. "I can make out what some of the lettering means, such as this one for 'river' and this one for 'life.'"

Kamil watched as Nijal pointed out the words while running his fingertip over them as he explained their meaning. He did his best to follow along and burn the impressions and their translations into his mind.

"The hammer is very similar," Nijal commented. He turned the weapon over in his hands and showed Kamil how the lettering on the knife was identical to slightly larger lettering on the cheek of the hammer. The texture of the metal, when the weapons were held next to one another, looked identical too. The steel had patterns of banding and mottling that reminded Kamil of softly running water.

Both of their gazes turned to the woman who sat at the lake's edge. They watched as her autumn-colored hair was caught up in a cool breeze from the surface of the water and danced lazily about her shoulders.



“Should I leave her alone?” Kamil asked.

“Aye lad, at least for now,” Nijal replied, patting Kamil's shoulder. “She is grieving and may be for quite some time. You don't need to be distant, but do remember that she had been willing to leave us at our inn and to the fury of the storm once it arrived.”

Kamil shot Nijal a glance and was about to argue the truth of his statement, but he was right. He thought about the travelers as they had left that very morning. Could the sadness he had detected been their knowledge of the fates that they were leaving Kamil and Nijal to?

“You don't trust her.” Kamil said.

“I trust her, Kamil. I just don't know her.”

Kamil nodded and watched her quietly. He did not know that while Elysandria sat alone, her feet brushed by the bitter cold of the water, she wept. She had allowed her heart to open up and all of her sadness and loss to pour out of her. She wept so fiercely that no sound escaped her open lips, and she mourned the memory of those she would never see again, her eyes blinded by stinging tears that fell down her pale cheeks.

The young woman thought about the journey that she and her companions had taken from the west before they had reached the inn. She thought about the trust she had built with them, the safety and assuredness of their company. She remembered all of the times Quassia had made her laugh, or when Tol had stayed up late with her giving her survival tips she pretended to pay attention too. She thought of all the times the giant hammer had been swung to save her life. She could still hear the voices that she'd heard every night, quietly debating with one another as she drifted off to sleep. She could smell their sweat and Quassia's bitter spices as if they were sitting right behind her.

Her shoulders shuddered with the memories. She felt that at any moment one of these two strangers who traveled with her would come up behind her, see her crying, and ask her if she was all right. Of course she wasn't all right, she would say to them. How could they ask

her such a thing? But the men thankfully left her to thoughts. For well over an hour she sat isolated and cried for her friends, remembering them with a fond bitterness that swept from anger to sadness to fear.

When Nijal had finally come to ask if she was ready to go, her tears had dried up and she'd caught herself staring across the water at the setting sun. She felt exhausted from having grieved for so long and didn't complain when the man lifted her packs and carried them for her. She stood up, saw Kamil staring, and offered him a simple smile that he readily returned before they all began walking northward once again.

Their road followed the curve of the lake until it reached the fast-flowing river that fed it. A cobblestone bridge stood at a crossroads with a road that followed the river to the north, and another that continued along the edge of the lake to the northwest. Nijal had noted before the sun had set that they were putting quite a bit of distance between themselves and the storm, and that it was quickly disappearing over the horizon. He commented to the others that he did not feel that it was coming north and that they would be safe to take a night's rest here. Neither of his companions complained.

A fire was started in a ring of stones and Nijal passed out some food. He recommended that both of his companions savor the meal, because the really delicious food would have to be eaten first so that it didn't sit in their packs and spoil. Elysandria seemed to take his words to heart, taking her time with the sugary fruit and delicious peppered meat. She favored Nijal with many murmurs of appreciation at the taste.

Before long the young woman was rolled up in a thick bedroll near the fire and fast asleep. Kamil returned from having walked back and forth along the short length of the nearby bridge about a dozen times while he stared up at the twinkling stars and the rings of the Pike shining in the night sky. He sat with Nijal.

"Was it difficult, leaving the inn?" Kamil asked.

"Yes," Nijal said, staring into the fire. "I've traveled to many places, Kamil. I have said goodbye to countless homes and never returned. But the Inn at the Crossroads is where I swore I'd live out the rest of my days and it pains me to leave it like this."

“The inn will be there when we come back,” Kamil said.

“Aye, lad, it better.”

“How long do you think we’ll be away?”

Nijal pursed his lips in thought. “If this storm is as bad as it looks, we could be gone all winter,” he said. “We’ll have a better idea of that once we ascend the pass and get a look at it. If it looks bad, we’ll continue north to Denshire. There’s a cozy town near the base of the mountains where we can stay for the season.”

“I’ve never been to Denshire,” Kamil said.

“It’s not so different from Valice; a bit flatter and far fewer trees. The people there are as courageous as they are curious. Don’t worry, lad, you’ll fit right in.”

Nijal clapped Kamil on the back and retrieved one of the larger backpacks from nearby, then sat close to his foster son.

“I retrieved something for you before we left,” Nijal said as he rummaged through the pack, then produced a long, heavy package wrapped in a soft cloth. When he passed it over and Kamil felt its weight and its shape, he knew what it was even before he lifted the cloth free.

“I want you to have it.”

In Kamil’s hands lay the dragon, Nijal’s prized weapon. It had taken years for Kamil to convince Nijal to allow him to shoot it, and now it was being gifted to him. The firelight shone off the polished barrel and the metal hammer, frizzen, and flashpan. The smooth wood of the handle and along the base of the weapon felt cool and comfortable in his hands.

“I stayed up late molding lead into balls for ammunition,” Nijal said as Kamil admired the weapon. “We do not have many and there is a limited supply of gunpowder, so there aren’t the resources for practice shooting. I hope you’ve listened to everything I taught you about firing it.”

“Nijal, thank you,” Kamil said. Nijal smiled proudly.

Kamil raised the dragon and looked down the iron sights, cocking the hammer back with his thumb and drawing a bead on a target in his mind's eye. He took a breath, held it a moment, then let it out slowly as he squeezed the trigger with a satisfying 'clack!'

Nijal and Kamil were already up when Elysandria woke to the smell of spiced ogren sausages. They sizzled in a pan over a low fire right before her as her eyelids slowly fluttered open, and the delicious smell caused her mouth to begin watering. She sat up and stretched her arms high over her head. Though she knew she had been dreaming, the memory of her dreams had fled quickly from her and she could not remember what any of them had been about.

Elysandria smiled when she saw a plate and fork laid out just in front of her on a tall, flat rock. She looked over her shoulder at her two traveling companions, who were standing a short distance away in the middle of the stone bridge near their camp and speaking quietly to one another. With a yawn, she reached out to help herself to the entire pan of sausages. The two used plates nearby made it obvious that both men had already eaten their shares. As she chewed her food, she wondered whether Nijal had any more of the delicious fruit he had offered her the day before.

Stacking the plates one atop the other after she finished her meal, she stood up and picked a few stray leaves out of her hair that had fallen there in the night. She walked up to the bridge, and at the sound of the dry autumn leaves crunching beneath her moccasins, both men turned to greet her.

“Good morning,” she said, blinking her dark eyes rapidly in the brightness of the sun.

“Good morning,” they both said.

She nudged her way between them to lean on the railing of the bridge, looking out west over the end of the river where it fed into the large lake. She noticed a strange, dark reflection on the surface and her eyes quickly snapped up to the sky. There, at the distant western edge of the water, swirled the storm. Kamil noticed her stare and leaned against the railing near her.

“It is many miles west of us, but moving north as we are,” the young man said. “We will watch it carefully to see if it draws any closer.”

Elysandria gripped the stone bridge tightly to mask the shaking in her hands. It was as though the storm were following her to finish what it had begun the previous morning. Perhaps that were true, she mused, and these nice men who trusted her were putting themselves in danger just by traveling with her.

She could see that Kamil was staring at her out of the corner of her eye. She slowly relaxed her grip on the railing and took a deep breath.

“Did you sleep well?” Kamil asked.

Elysandria nodded and turned to him.

“I did, thank you. But you should have woken me. We need to stay ahead of the storm.”

Nijal had left the bridge and returned to the camp where he was collecting the dirty dishes and utensils. He carried them to the river and crouched to clean them in the fast-flowing water.

“You needed the rest,” Kamil said. “I know you did.”

A silent kinship passed between the two as they walked back to camp. Elysandria could sense empathy behind his words, as though he understood what it meant to lose someone. She realized that she felt much better than she had the night before.

“I haven’t slept that deeply in a long time,” she said.

Elysandria helped Kamil pack up the rest of the camp as Nijal returned from his errand at the river. The innkeeper poured water on the smoldering remains of their fire, kicked dirt into the rock-ringed pit it had blazed in, and started hefting packs. Elysandria and Kamil each chose a couple packs to carry, and soon they were all laden with their traveling burden, slightly lighter than yesterday but still heavy with ample supplies.

They crossed the bridge together and traveled north alongside the river for most of the day. The sound of the rushing water was a soothing comfort to the young woman. She trailed the men and saw the way in which they silently communicated, exchanging looks that meant everything from, 'watch out for that sinkhole' to, 'do you need a rest?' It reminded her fondly of the friendships she had shared with others in her lifetime.

In the late afternoon their path veered from the river at a grand waterfall, tiered in three steps as it plunged over a massive ravine. Even as they passed by it from a distance, the mist that was kicked up by the falling water dampened the traveler's hair and clothing. A long stretch of the path that ascended to the top of the cliff continued to switch back on itself over and over as it climbed. The arduous hike began to take its toll.

"Don't worry," Kamil said between heavy breaths when they took a short rest about halfway to the top, "tomorrow morning I will cook pancakes. After this hike we'll deserve them."

The thought lifted everyone's spirits. Elysandria noticed that at each switchback there were large, well-used clearings of rutted dirt. Nijal explained that caravans and travelers with wagons required such clearings to turn their vehicles around as they navigated up and down the path.

At the top of the cliff, the travelers took a long rest. They could gaze out over the canopy of trees for a great distance to the west and south from this vantage. The road they had taken from the inn cut the landscape in half as it rolled over and between hills and disappeared in large copses of trees, only to reappear and continue at the far side. Elysandria could not see the end of it. The inn was already farther away than she could see. They were making good progress.

As Elysandria sat, she saw her fingertips resting at the edges of an oddly shaped depression in the soil. It was the large, heavy footprint of a three-toed creature that had recently traveled this way.

"Cliffjumper," Nijal said. He was just behind her and had noticed the tracks as well. "I saw these tracks on our way up. The rider is traveling in the same direction as we are. They probably passed through here late last night."

Cliffjumpers were creatures that were often used as pack animals or as mounts. Standing upright upon two powerful hind legs, they had long necks and a very long tail and two small, seemingly superfluous arms. Their neck and shoulders were adorned with a mane of shaggy, featherlike fur that extended down the middle of their backs all the way to the tips of their tails. Adults easily stood at more than eight feet tall from their talons to the tops of their heads. While they were quite vicious when encountered in the wild, they were very intelligent creatures and easily domesticated if trained while still young.

“They are common where I am from,” Elysandria said.

“And where is that?” Kamil asked as he scooted closer.

Elysandria lowered her head and drew her cloak tightly around her body. Kamil glanced up at Nijal, who shook his head subtly. The woman was obviously uncomfortable talking about herself. He quickly changed his question.

“Have you ever ridden one before?”

Elysandria shook her head rapidly and looked appalled and horrified at the thought.

“I’ll let my legs do my walking for me,” she said.

“I would love to ride one,” Kamil said. “Travelers often arrive at the inn on them, but none have let me ride. A few have even warned me not to tend them in the stable.”

“Wise advice if you value your fingers,” Nijal said.

When Elysandria lifted her eyes to look at Kamil, he smiled a reassuring smile at her. She smiled back, relieved that she had not been pressed to talk about her home.

After a relatively awkward moment where the three of them determined the politics of where to go to relieve themselves, packs were lifted and their travel northward resumed. There was a chill in the evening air as they gained altitude. The mountains that had loomed on the horizon the previous day steadily grew closer and closer, rising up like a great wall of stone before them. Trees and



foliage became more and more sparse. They found their boots kicking up dirt and rock as the path moved from soft soil to clay and then to hard stone. Large shrubs began to replace lush bushes and evergreen trees began replacing deciduous ones.

A camp was called against a curved rock that stood nearly sixty feet tall, its concave shape providing good cover from the cool bite of the rising winds. Little was said before they bedded down for the night, although Elysandria believed that she heard the men whispering to one another as she drifted into slumber. Her sleep that night was dreamless.

In the morning, true to his word, Kamil treated everyone to pancakes. To Elysandria's delight, after having noticed her appreciation of Nijal's fruits, the young man had mixed delicious bits of it into hers.

Travel continued as it had the evening before. Ever upwards, all three travelers began feeling the burn in their thighs from the steady climb. This, coupled with the higher altitude, forced more rests out of them throughout the day. Their restful time was spent with idle banter, staring back south over the ground they had covered, and warily watching the storm. It had not seemed to move any further since they spotted it over the west bank of the lake the previous morning and was only barely visible far to the southwest. This brought comfort to all of their hearts.

On the fourth day of travel the true hike began. They had reached the beginning of the pass that sliced up through the mountains. Heavy cloaks were retrieved from the packs and handed out by Nijal, who warned that the temperatures in the mountains would easily reach below freezing, especially during autumn nights. He had ensured during their journey through lower Valice that perishables and heavier food supplies had been eaten, lightening their load considerably for what lay ahead.

"The pass is separated by three towers," Nijal explained as everyone donned their new cloaks. "If we make good time today we will reach the southernmost tower and have shelter for the night."

Kamil's thumbs felt numb in the cold and he was having difficulty clasping his cloak tightly around his shoulders. Elysandria moved to help him as Nijal continued to explain their journey.

“The pass continues upward from there to Summit Tower, where we will spend our second night, and then begins its long descent along the far side of the range. Eventually, we’ll reach Shire’s Watch, a tower that stands at the southern border of Denshire.”

As they began their drive up the pass, the wind really began to blow. Funneled by the geography around them, it carried the freezing air of the highest peaks on its back as it knifed into the travelers, dulling all feeling in their cheeks and causing their cloaks to whip angrily behind them. Elysandria held tightly to the front of hers, fearing that to do otherwise would have allowed the wind carry it away all the way back to the Inn at the Crossroads.

She thought that Kamil would have to be left behind when they started encountering snow. The man marveled at the sheer volume of it, and she guessed that he had had little contact with it in his young life. She laughed when, after a stern talking-to about how they had to make time and couldn't 'dilly-dally', Kamil had caught Nijal across the chin with a well-placed snowball. The playful fight that followed had finally ended when Elysandria, surprising everyone at her speed and the force behind her strike, tackled Kamil around the waist and into a snow bank that quickly concealed them both save the soles of their boots.

After Nijal had fished the two of them out of the snow he called a halt, and all three dropped to rest. Breaths were caught and laughs were shared. Soon, truly concerned that they wouldn't reach the south tower before the sun set, Nijal encouraged everyone to get back on their feet and start moving again.

The cloudless skies that had marked every day of their travel thus far were quickly giving way to a gathering overcast. There were spots where the sky looked downright furious in its growing darkness. Nijal squinted and looked high above them to one of the peaks that towered overhead, noting that the clouds were swirling angrily from its tip. The telltale signs were all there: a vicious storm was approaching.

Despite the freezing winds, the heavens thankfully showed mercy upon the travelers and did not pour rain or snow on their heads before they reached the tower. They had been able to see the structure for two full hours in the distance above them before they finally managed to hike up the circuitous route of the pass that led to its doorstep.

Three stories tall, the tower had been built centuries ago and was kept up mostly by the various traders and travelers that frequented it. During the warmer months when the pass was constantly in use by men and women moving between the two countries, merchants would spend days, weeks, and sometimes months at the tower making a living for themselves. The last time Nijal had been here, there was a veritable marketplace that had sprung up in the courtyard.

This time, however, the tower was dark and empty. Two large wooden doors were fit into its tall entrance, and while one stood firmly closed, the other was bent inward and hung haphazardly by only its lower hinge. The upper hinge and part of the stone of the tower that it had been attached to had been ripped free by some unknown force. Perhaps it had been the wind, Nijal thought. He had his doubts.

Lowering his packs to the snow-covered ground, Nijal walked toward the entrance of the tower wielding the large hammer. Kamil slipped Tol's knife free of his belt and, with Elysandria at his side, followed his mentor as the undamaged side of the door was carefully pushed open with a loud creak.

"Kamil," Nijal said softly from the doorway, but loud enough to be heard over the winds that whipped around them, "There are sconces with torches just inside the door here. Light them, please."

Kamil reached into one of his small belt pouches for a piece of flint. He moved up behind Nijal and struck the knife's blade against the flint many times, creating bright showers of sparks that fell upon the ends of the torches. After a minute of trying, Kamil reached up with his hand and felt the wood. It crumbled beneath his palm and stained the skin black.

"They are spent, Nijal," Kamil said.

"I will get the lantern," Elysandria offered. She ran back to the courtyard and retrieved it from the packs. With Kamil's help she had it lit, and she moved to Nijal's side with the lantern raised high. Light shone into the tower, revealing what lay within as long shadows flickered on the far wall.

“You deserve to know my story. The two of you have been so kind to me and yet I don’t feel as though I have truly earned your trust. There is no need to argue... I mean what I say. For what it is worth, despite my silence during our travels, I greatly appreciate everything you have done for me.

“I first met Tol and Quassia nearly two years ago. They had wandered into the lands of my sisters out of desperation, for there was a terrible beast that hunted them. Quassia was gravely wounded, but my sisters are very good with poultices and healing. I convinced my people against their better judgment to allow the men entry. Usually, we D'wammish are fiercely protective of our land and its secrets when it comes to outsiders, but at my urging an exception was made.

“While they spent time in our care, Tol explained the purpose for their journey. They were warriors who hunted daemons. Tol's people, the Ro, have long considered themselves as protectors of the natural world from the unnatural influences which spring up to corrupt it. They think of any creature or force that causes such corruption as a daemon.

“Quassia was loyal to Tol through a friendship they had shared for decades and was accompanying him as a guide and as a diplomat to the various cultures that they would come across in their travels. Ro are rare in our parts, you see. Their homeland is far to the east across the veil.

“I was captivated. Tol was brave and his quest was selfless and just. I had never been beyond the bounds of my people's land and I longed to see the world. When Quassia was healed and fit for travel I announced to my sisters that I planned to leave our home with them. Any sadness I'd felt as I departed the safety and beauty of my homeland was quickly forgotten by the fire I saw burning behind Tol's eyes and his passion to track down and kill the daemon that had injured Quassia.

“We tracked his quarry for months to the south, and then far to

the west. We left lower Valice and the place that you call home far behind us. We stalked our prey deep into the frontier, and despite our efforts it continued to elude us. We came across entire settlements of pilgrims who had been slaughtered by this daemon. Not even the women and children escaped its wrath. It killed and corrupted completely and seemingly without purpose or provocation. It did not eat their bodies. It did not loot their possessions. It simply drove ever onward to find and consume more life.

“When the day came where we finally overtook the beast, the battle was a vicious one. It had long known that we hunted it and had sprung a trap. I remember little besides the perfectly blue day it was when the shadow descended upon us. My last thoughts as pain and terror swept through my body were that I had surely breathed my very last.

“I awoke a day later to Quassia's gentle ministrations. The beast was dead and Tol had taken its head. The fire in his eyes had quelled to a simmer that sparkled with satisfaction. He had completed his quest and defeated that which had eluded him and destroyed so much.

“Tol decided to hire a mercenary, and that was when we met Hickory. That was his name, you know; the quiet man who carried the hammer. His job was to be our muscle when things got dangerous, but I knew that Tol's true purpose for hiring him was to watch over me. My sisters had trained me well with a blade. I was a decent hunter and a quick study. But my wounds caused Tol and Quassia enough worry that they felt Hickory was a necessary addition to our band.

“He was a man of little words and acclimated quickly to our lifestyle. We journeyed throughout the frontier lands of the west seeking further adventure and, in many cases, fortune. In seeking such fortune we followed countless local legends into dangerous and dark places. Most of the time the legends were nothing but myth, but every once in a while we would uncover truly magical places. One such place existed at the heart of a dark storm that had raged for generations, or so the local stories said. It was in this place, beneath inky-black clouds that roiled and churned with unfettered rage, that we first encountered the Roukon.

“They began as a simple seed; a darkness that burned at the center of the storm like shadow-fire. There is little else in the way of words I can muster to describe what we saw. Tol was determined to quench

the flame, but our actions only caused it to grow. It knifed at our hearts and gave us a feeling of terror with every breath we drew. Before long, we were forced to flee before it. It did not remain where it had burned for so long, however. Like a wildfire burning unchecked in the wilderness it began consuming the land around it. The storm clouds overhead expanded with it, and powerless to stop its relentless expansion, we fled.

“Creatures of shadow began to appear at the head of the storm. Roukon, I called them, after an ancient legend of my people. The name conjures images of ravenous hunger and death. They corrupted and killed life. Flowers withered, trees rotted, and rivers turned to mud. Tol led us in strategy after strategy to battle them, but always they overcame and nearly destroyed us. These dark creatures continued to grow in number as the storm grew in size and they quickly became a blight. To Tol they were a daemon swarm.

“Our quest changed, then. We felt we had to warn those in the path of this coming storm and help them to flee before it consumed them. Many villages ignored our pleas, but there were others that readily followed us. We fled the frontier with a growing number of pilgrims as our charges, and ever the storm burned on the horizon behind us. We passed across the vast wasteland that separates the land you know as lower Valice from the frontier in which we had found the Roukon. An ancient fortress stood at the border where we intended to make our stand. We stood vigilantly upon its walls and scanned the horizon for the storm, but it did not appear.

“The fortress had an old forge and foundry which supplied metals from a nearby quarry. Hickory used his skills as a blacksmith and I lent my knowledge of the D’wammish ways to forge weapons to use against the Roukon. We could only make a handful, enough small blades for a dozen or so of us, before we finally saw the storm appear on the horizon. Many men sent their families to flee to the east while others chose to escape with them in the face of the evil that bore down upon us. They were the smart ones. Hickory vowed that he would keep all of us safe and, in the final days before the storm arrived, he worked at the forge until he had fashioned a great hammer.

“Yes, that knife of yours and the hammer that Nijal now carries are the weapons that I speak of. My people, the D’wammish, use ancient metalsmithing techniques that we are loathe to share with

others. Do you see how the metal on your knife has swirling impressions upon it? That is not a design. It is the result of a practice we use to strengthen the steel. I had a blade as well, but I lost it in the battle that ensued once the swarm hit our gates.

“They swept into the fortress like the veil sweeps over the shore. We believed the high walls would protect us, but the Roukon relentlessly scoured them and quickly found the places where they were the weakest. Battle cries that had gone up just moments before the battle began quickly turned to cries of fear. These men were farmers, cooks, and cobblers, not warriors. They fell quickly. The few who could fight back did so with courage and bravery, but sadly found themselves facing a relentless enemy that ignored any wound they managed to inflict.

“Only the weapons Hickory and I had forged had any effect in driving the creatures back. Only wounds from those weapons felled the creatures and caused the others to pause. As the pilgrims died around us, we fled. Hickory covered our escape. A handful of survivors had made it out with us, but in our running battle to flee the fortress and escape from beneath the bitter storm of the Roukon, and despite Hickory’s mighty hammer, we lost every last one of them.

“I do not recall how long we ran. The storm had receded to the furthest horizon when Tol finally allowed us to catch our breaths. That was the moment that true despair descended on all of us. This was far beyond our ability to stop. The storm would rage unchecked across all of Valice. The decision wasn’t light in the making, I promise you, but Tol decided he would take us to Elderbrook and across the veil to his homeland. The Ro, the daemon hunters and protectors from corruption, would know how to deal with this threat.

“There was much dissension among us. Quassia and I argued with Tol even as we continued on our way east. Quassia wished to travel to Denshire and warn them of the storm. Tol promised that the swarm would not cross the barrier of the mountains and reach Denshire, but we all knew it was a thin promise. Furthermore, however, we knew that such a detour could cut us off from the harbor that lay in the east.

“I wrestled with Tol’s decision. Many times, I made plans to break off from my companions and go north to warn my sisters. Every morning I woke up with that intention, and every evening I went to sleep again in the camp of these fellows I had come to love. Tol’s

leadership, Quassia's kind heart, and Hickory's skill in battle had seen me through many trials. I was not ready to leave.

“We avoided roads. Tol did not wish us to encounter any travelers. He felt that our last attempt to save people from what approached had nearly gotten us killed. He was determined that nothing would hinder us; that the only hope for stopping this blight was to reach his lands as soon as possible. One sunny autumn day as we crossed through lower Valice with the intention of being in Kevtin Valley well before the sun set, we heard a loud crack of thunder.

“That was you, Kamil. We investigated the sound and discovered, not far from where we traveled, an inn that sat upon a clearing on a hill. Everyone quickly agreed that our packs were too heavy, our stomachs too empty, and our heads in desperate need of proper rest. And so we came to your inn. We allowed ourselves a night to be normal one final time. To fill our bellies with food and enjoy drinks as we had so many times before our terrible retreat began. My heart was breaking at the despair and anger I felt, at the loss of those people who had trusted us, and at our decision not to warn others we came across.

“I am sorry I did not tell you. It is a poor excuse, but I was already conflicted with my own concerns at whether I would see this journey through and leave these shores for Tol's homeland, or split off to the north and warn my sisters of what was coming. My heart truly broke when you met us the following morning and I chose not to tell you. You deserved to know.

“The attack came without warning. There was no sound, no storm high above us that heralded the Roukon that lay in wait. They ambushed us from the trees and chaos erupted. I remember little of the course of events. I remember Tol shouting orders. I remember Quassia's pained screams. I remember Hickory backing me up as he swung his great hammer all around him and then the crushing weight of his body as he fell back upon me.

“I remember sunshine and the sweet smell of lavender, and then I remember nothing.”



Kamil and Elysandria sat together atop the south tower in the darkness of the night as her story drew to a close. Snowflakes gently fell around them and gathered on their shoulders.

Hours ago they had entered the tower with the lantern held high and quickly realized that it had been empty for months. The interior held signs of a hastily abandoned camp with bedrolls still lying upon the cold stone floor next to a pack with rotted food and a half-completed map of Valice. A single, broken bottle lay in many pieces amidst a stain of wine near the wall. Nijal had carefully led the way through the building until he was sure that nothing yet hid in its shadows to assail them in the night. They had then relaxed their guard and set up camp.

Elysandria and Kamil had climbed the stairs of the tower together, which were carved right out of the stone walls and spun round the interior for three revolutions until ending at a wooden trapdoor in the ceiling that allowed access to the roof. The latch had been broken and the wind had rattled the trapdoor ominously as they approached.

Wrapped in their heavy cloaks, the two had climbed up onto the roof and stepped to the southern edge, looking out over the vast expanse of southern Valice as the stars and the rings of the Pike glowed through various clearings in the clouds overhead. Elysandria had gestured for Kamil to sit beside her, and then she had launched into her tale.

Kamil could see that her sadness at not having told Nijal and him the truth about the danger that they were fleeing from was genuine, and the young man decided that there was no need to confront her about it. She had been through enough already. They were companions now, on a dangerous journey to escape a relentless foe, and this was a time for understanding and compassion.

“Thank you for trusting me with your story,” he said.

The snow was muffling the sound all around them. Kamil's voice sounded as though he were speaking in a small room despite the wide open sky that they sat beneath.

Elysandria smiled softly and rested her head on Kamil's shoulder.

"Thank you for listening."

Clouds continued to roll in overhead and the falling snowflakes got thicker and more frequent, caressing the two of them softly. Kamil noticed that Elysandria's cheeks did not glow a rosy color in the chill of the night as his did.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked as he pulled his cloak tightly around his body.

Elysandria shook her head, and he saw that her cloak was only resting loosely on her shoulders. She was staring up into the sky above Valice just like when he had seen her on the roof of the Inn at the Crossroads. He followed her gaze and spotted the glow of the Pike through a small break in the clouds, and he marveled to himself at how the rings and the stars seemed so much closer to him here than when he would stargaze from home.

As they sat together quietly, the wind picked up and blew her cloak free from her far shoulder. He reached around her to replace it and marveled at the warmth that seemed to radiate from her exposed skin even in the bitter cold of the mountain air and falling snow.

After a while he began to grow concerned at the increasing rate of the snowfall. He was about to recommend that they head back inside when he realized she was asleep by her steady breathing.

"Elysandria," he whispered.

When she didn't awaken, he poked her lightly with his elbow. She murmured something quietly but her eyes didn't open. She was already sleeping deeply.

With a sigh, Kamil reached beneath her knees and lifted her in his arms. She was incredibly light. He walked to the trapdoor, hooked the toe of his boot into the latch, and lifted it awkwardly. When it fell

back against the tower with a thud, dulled slightly by the accumulating snow, he winced and worried that the sound would awaken her. She just fidgeted slightly in his arms and breathed a long, sleepy sigh.

He carried her downstairs and found Nijal sitting at the entrance of the tower with the unbroken door partly open and allowing wisps of snow to be carried inside by the breeze. The interior smelled acutely of the briar tobacco pipe that the older man idly smoked. When he saw Kamil carrying Elysandria down the stairs, he gave him an admonishing look.

“What?” Kamil said as he gently laid her down beside her bedroll. “She fell asleep.”

After Kamil had Elysandria wrapped up tightly for the night, he moved to join his companion at the doorway. He politely waved off Nijal's offer of a pull on his pipe.

“She spoke to me for a long time,” Kamil said, glancing over his shoulder at Elysandria's sleeping form. Nijal cocked an eyebrow as if to quietly ask for more details, and Kamil began relating her story to him in a soft voice. The older man listened intently to the tale, nodding occasionally. By the time it was finished, his pipe smoldered long-forgotten in his hand.

“Roukon...” Nijal repeated the name that Elysandria had given the creatures. “It is a D'wammish word. I believe it uses the characters for 'hunger' and 'undeath'.”

“How do you know so much about her language?”

“The folk in Denshire often use D'wammish lettering for things, such as road signs and gravestones. You can convey a lot in D'wammish with just a few characters.”

After a while, both men pulled the door shut. They were unable to do much about the other, broken door being slightly open due to the damage to its hinge. All three of the travelers were soon asleep and dreaming in the warmth of their bedrolls. In that warmth, despite reliving her nightmare by having told her story to Kamil, Elysandria dreamt of sweetly flavored pancakes and snowflakes gently falling in

her hair.

Overnight, the snowfall came down thick and had accumulated in a wet pile inside the tower, having snuck through the opening in the broken door. Nijal inspected the conditions and reported that they were not quite snowed in, then went to work to ensure that the snow was adequately shoveled away so that such a setback did not happen. The snowfall was so dense that, watching him work from inside the tower, Elysandria and Kamil could barely see his outline after he had moved only a few feet out from the doorway.

“This is not good weather for traveling the pass,” Nijal said as he reentered the tower and pushed the door shut behind him. Kamil was returning from the roof as Nijal spoke.

“I cannot see down into lower Valice with the weather like this,” the young man said. “There is no way to know if the dark storm is pursuing us up the pass.”

Elysandria sat quietly, her bedroll wrapped around her from the waist down. Her head tilted from one direction to the next, watching Kamil or Nijal whenever one of them spoke.

“I am going to check the pass to the summit tower,” Nijal decided. “Please, stay here and stay warm.”

Nijal was emphasizing his words, and Elysandria believed with a grin that he was doing so to ensure that Kamil wouldn’t jump up after he’d left and follow him. The older man gathered warm clothes and donned his heavy cloak again before exiting the tower to brave the snow.

Kamil stared at the door for a long time after Nijal had gone. Elysandria fished fruits out of the packs and helped herself to a bright green apple, her face puckering up at the sour taste. Kamil eventually sat down with her and reached into his own pack to retrieve the dragon that Nijal had given him. He pulled the thick leather ammo bag out as well, listening to the round lead balls inside as they clacked and rolled together.

“Do you think the Roukon will travel up the pass?” Kamil asked, turning to look at Elysandria’s sour-puckered face.

She smiled brightly and nodded. "Yes, I do," she said. "They are not put off by mountains."

Kamil was perplexed at the way the woman could look and sound so happy when relating such dour news. She held out the apple she was munching on with a look that offered the rest to him, but he politely declined with a wave of his hand.

"Do you think they are following us?" he asked.

Elysandria, her mouth full of apple, shook her head. She set the rest of her meal down and wrapped it up in a napkin as she swallowed her food.

"No," she said. "They hunt life, but they do not hunt individuals. They are hunting everyone and everything alive. They feed on life and it makes them grow."

"It makes them grow?" Kamil felt the knife of desperation twist in his heart.

"Yes, of course. Remember what I told you last night? The swarm has been growing ever since we first encountered it. For every life it takes, every tree it strips, every flower it wilts, it will grow larger. It will continue to grow until it has nothing left to consume."

Kamil stood up and wrapped his arms around himself as he walked to the door, staring at the snow through the broken opening. Elysandria swallowed hard as she realized how her words had stricken his heart with fear. She called out to him softly.

"I'm sorry, Kamil."

"You are only speaking the truth," Kamil said, still staring outside. "Ever since we left the inn I've thought of this as a simple journey, but it is more of an exodus. I don't want to think of my home as a place I will never see again. I don't want to think about what might happen if those things catch up to us. You have nothing to apologize for, Elysandria."

"Elys."

Kamil turned around and looked at his companion, her dark eyes shining in the light that glistened into the tower from the hole in the door. He tilted his head questioningly.

“Call me Elys,” she said, and smiled again.

Kamil found it impossible to continue worrying. Something about this woman’s assured smile and her bright eyes sparkling back at him gave him a feeling of hope that he had little right to have. She had been through so much already. She had looked these creatures in the eye and survived while those she loved had died around her. She had every right to despair and give in to the hopelessness of their situation, but she did not. Instead, she smiled and enjoyed an apple and looked up at him with confident eyes.

Elysandria retrieved a fresh green apple from Nijal's pack and lobbed it at him. He jumped and struggled to catch it, then stared at it for a long moment as he held it in his hands. After a long moment he lifted his eyes to Elysandria, smiled, and left the chill of the broken tower door to sit at her side and quietly enjoy the sour treat.

After a while, Kamil began explaining to Elys how the dragon worked. He demonstrated carefully how to load the gunpowder after bringing the hammer to a half-cocked position. To gently stuff a lead ball down with small, custom cut pieces of cloth. She listened attentively, very curious as to how the weapon worked and asking many questions about the way in which the flint struck the frizzen and ignited the small amount of gunpowder that was required to be sprinkled into the pan.

She had asked if she could hold the dragon and was pointing the fully cocked but unloaded weapon at the door when Nijal returned.

Elys smiled up at the older man and lowered the weapon as he unwrapped a scarf from around his nose and mouth and shook out his cloak.

“Are you two staying out of trouble?”

“Of course,” Kamil said, gently taking his dragon back from Elysandria and releasing the hammer to an un-cocked position. Nijal

turned and shut the tower door behind him.

“We cannot ascend the pass,” he reported. “It is blocked by snow far earlier than usual this year.”

“Is there another way?” Kamil asked.

Nijal paused before responding. “Yes,” he finally said. “We can travel through the Mizzlemist. Mist Water Gully. It will add at least a day to our journey, but it is the only way I can think of to safely cross these mountains.”

Kamil nodded. “When do we leave?” he asked.

Nijal turned and looked through the broken door at the falling snow. “I don't believe this storm will continue much longer,” he said. “We must keep traveling up the pass for a ways before we can descend into the gully. It would be wise to wait out the storm if you think that our pursuers will not reach us before then.”

Nijal and Kamil both looked at Elysandria, hoping that she might have assurances one way or the other. The young woman shook her head, her golden-red and yellow locks waving back and forth.

“I think we are safe,” she said in a soft voice. “There were times where three days of solid travel would put us a good week ahead of them. If you think that traveling in this storm is too dangerous, then I agree that we should stay here for now.”

She paused, and her eyes shifted to Kamil before she continued.

“Of course, I also believed we were safe enough to stay at your inn for a night.”

The snowfall abated the following afternoon and Nijal decided it was time for everyone to pack up and head out. Despite the clearing in the weather, low clouds still concealed the route they had taken through Valice and up into the mountains and they could not see whether the dark storm clouds of the Roukon had gained any ground.

It was a slow, steady trip up the pass. Nijal led the way cautiously, and often Elys found herself slogging through snow that at many points during her hike was so deep it came up well past her knees. Kamil followed behind her and did what he could to aid her when she got stuck.

The cold was fierce and bit at their exposed faces. Kamil thought to ask Elysandria whether the moccasins she wore would be enough to stave off the chill, but she never complained. In fact, she seemed to be the only one without chattering teeth. Kamil remembered the warmth he had felt coming off of her skin when he had sat with her atop the tower and imagined that it had something to do with her relative comfort.

The mountain peaks were quiet and stoic, rising like giant sentinels all around them as they continued ever upwards. For a long stretch the path skirted a steep cliff that gave Kamil terrible vertigo when he risked a curious glimpse over the side. He saw the tips of massive green trees poking out from the fog far below them in a jagged, narrow valley.

Elys asked for a halt when they crossed over a makeshift bridge of stones that jutted out of the ice and snow. A thin ribbon of a waterfall, frozen in the bitter cold, glistened on the rock face and she reached out with her fingers to touch it. Her dark eyes sparkled as she lifted her gaze up and up the length of it, seeing that just beneath the thick layer of ice, rivulets of water still slid down the mountain and underneath the ice beneath her feet before plunging down into the valley below. Nijal and Kamil allowed her the pause, taking a moment to drink from their waterskins and catch their breath.



“The snowmelt from these mountains feeds into the Mizzlemist,” Nijal said. “The gully derives its name from the countless rivers and waterfalls that converge on its central lake before they drain northward out of the mountains and into Denshire Valley. Three rivers leave these mountains, and they all converge into the Peregrinate River that extends the length of Denshire eastward all the way to the veil.”

Nijal took a seat on one of the larger rocks and, once Elysandria had turned her attention away from the frozen waterfall, insisted that she take a long drink from his waterskin. He noticed as she accepted the water from him that her long fingers and the palm of her hand were a dangerous shade of blue. He worried that the poor woman was in danger of frostbite or worse, but before his eyes the blue pallor of her skin faded so naturally and quickly that it made him wonder if he hadn't just imagined what he saw.

Kamil stood at the edge of the cliff and stared out over the crevasse. His mind was still in the past. This morning, like nearly every morning since they had left, he had been startled to awaken in a place that was not his bed in the inn. Homesickness was setting in after only a week had gone by on their journey. It was a difficult adjustment for the young man to make; especially when there was the very real possibility that home would never be a place he could safely return to.

Nijal had witnessed Kamil's sadness over the past few days and his heart ached for him, but he left the young man to his thoughts for now. It was not unhealthy to remember home with a fondness. Truly, Nijal felt honored that he could provide his boy with such a place. Ever since his father had left him, Kamil had developed a way of understanding the world that often reached into the past for answers and for comfort. The older man hoped that his foster son would eventually be able to come to terms with the reality of the situation they were all in.

Having drank their fill and allowed time for their breath and their hearts to calm from the stress of their climb, the three continued on their journey. The pass curved around a mountain and then began a gentle descent until they had finally left the sheer cliff behind them. They approached a post made of stacked stones and mortar that marked a sudden rise in their road. Kamil followed what was supposed to be the path up the mountain with his eyes and could only

see a steep, snow-covered wall with evergreen trees jutting out of it.

“We cannot go up from here,” Nijal said. “We will have to descend into Mist Water Gully. Though it will not be as treacherous as if we tried to hike to the summit tower, the journey down into the gully will be steep, so watch your step.”

“When you left yesterday, did you travel all the way to this point to check the pass?” Kamil asked.

Nijal nodded. It had taken the three of them nearly three hours of arduous climbing to reach this point. Nijal had been gone and back in that amount of time yesterday. The man was an impressive traveler.

“It’s a shame we don’t have a sled,” Elysandria said.

Nijal laughed and began to pick careful steps to lead them down the mountain. Elys was thankful that the snow didn't seem as deep here and she felt relief at the ease in which she was able to keep pace with her companions.

As they traveled it became apparent that they were descending the mountain slopes directly into a bank of thick fog. The only evidence that any world existed beyond the fog was the green tips of a few trees that poked out brightly from its grim, grey surface. It seemed to Kamil as though he were willingly walking down into the abyss itself, and as the wall of fog loomed nearer and nearer, the prospect of journeying through it became all the more daunting. Before long, Nijal was leading them all straight into it.

“Stay close and watch your step,” he warned.

Elysandria moved closer to Kamil. They slowed their pace considerably and picked their steps very carefully. It was impossible to see much farther than a few feet. In every direction there were swirling grays and stark whites, and it became difficult to keep their balance with gravity pulling them at what felt like an awkward angle with the steepness of the mountain.

With a yelp, Elysandria slipped. Kamil had enough of his wits about him to quickly reach out to her with an arm, and the woman managed to grasp it as she slid past. The force of her fall was enough

to drag Kamil off his feet, but he somehow managed not to slip despite the slick snow bank that he'd fallen into. For a moment they both lay there, her fingers grasping his wrist tightly. Once she was assured that she wasn't going to fall to the bottom of the world, she slowly let go and rested back in the snow.

“Are you okay?” Kamil asked. Elys nodded. She had a look of horror on her face at what had almost occurred.

The woman lay back in the snow with a huff. Kamil sighed with relief and lay back as well. Nijal, calling up to them, realized they were taking a breather and trudged up to where they lay.

“You are both going to catch your deaths, lying in the snow like that.”

Kamil pursed his lips and made dismissive a sound at his mentor, and then all of the adrenaline rushed from his body and he began to laugh. Elys joined him, and the two giggled together as Nijal looked curiously down at them.

“How much further is it to the gully, Nijal?” Kamil eventually asked.

“I can't tell in this fog,” Nijal answered. “I have only been in the Mizzlemist once, and it was at the north end by the deep falls. I'd imagine we are more than halfway.”

“It will be dark soon,” Kamil pointed out. “Will we be able to find shelter?”

“I imagine so. It is a lush gully. The plants of the Mizzlemist grow very large and the trees have a thick canopy, so the snow should not be as bad once we are under them.”

“I'm cold,” came Elys' quiet voice.

Kamil looked over his shoulder and up at the young woman. Elysandria was sitting up now and her skin, as Nijal had noticed before at the frozen waterfall, had become dangerously blue.

“You *look* cold,” Kamil said, hopping up to his feet. “Are you

okay?"

"I'm fine..." Elysandria said, her voice trailing off. She tried to get up, slipped, and fell on her backside again. Kamil would have laughed, but the look on Elys' face, the bitter cold she seemed to be experiencing by the pallor of her skin, concerned him greatly.

He reached out a hand to her and she gladly took it. In stark contrast to the night atop the tower, her skin was deathly cold and felt unnaturally firm beneath his fingers. His grasp began to slip, and as he tried to pull her to her feet the slick, cool surface of her skin quickly slid free from his palm and fingers. Off-balance, Kamil fell backwards. He heard Elysandria shout his name.

It seemed as though he fell longer than he should, and his disorientation caused him to hit the snow very hard. He felt himself sliding, and he collided with something solid which gave way and began to slide with him.

Nijal gasped as Kamil struck his legs, knocking them out from under him, and then both men began to tumble with their arms wildly stretching out for anything to halt their growing momentum. Nijal's arm twisted as he rebounded off of something hard and he tried to cry out in pain, but his mouth filled with snow and he had trouble breathing. As they continued to fall, an avalanche of snow fell with them.

Kamil's air had been knocked from his lungs and he struggled to catch his breath. Every second of his tumble down the slope felt like long, agonizing minutes. He wondered if he would continue to slip down and down the mountains until he landed in Denshire.

The ground suddenly disappeared from beneath him, and the young man felt himself flailing in mid-air. He opened his eyes, and through a cascade of snow that was falling with him, he saw the dark twilight of a valley lined with oddly green and violet natural shapes that twisted and snaked in all directions like the tangle of a long-forgotten garden. Tall trees with thick, deep red trunks lifted skyward until they disappeared into a ceiling of dark fog.

His surroundings were so unnatural to him that Kamil again conjured images of descending, or rather falling, into the abyss itself. Questions began to form in his mind about what this place was. What

the strange, twisting green and violet shapes were. How he had gotten here.

His thoughts were forced from him when he struck the ground. Though the snow from the avalanche had somewhat cushioned his fall, pain still knifed through his body. A thick, heavy blanketing of what seemed a veritable mountain of frost fell upon him and he reached out and upward furtively with his arm, seeking the safety of a surface as though he were drowning. As a horrible cold settled in around him and pain overcame every one of his senses, he blacked out.

Debo ran the length of a thick vine and leapt to the soft soil, the soles of his long feet crunching on the deciduous leaves that had fallen in scattered heaps from the many sycamore trees that surrounded him. He caught sight of his quarry before it bounded behind a thick copse of tree trunks and he quickly gave chase.

Felfawns were agile herbivores. Most hunters have but one shot with their bows to take one down or the animal will bound away far faster than the hunter can give chase. He had heard the satisfying sound of his arrow striking its mark, but he had missed the animal's heart. Now it fled, leaving a scattered trail of blood in its wake. Debo knew that so long as he didn't lose it in the trees he had a good chance of having food to bring home to his clan.

He used the vineways; thick, snaking vines which wrapped around and between the thick trunks of the densely packed trees. These vines created a network of winding paths that allowed Debo to continue closing the distance between himself and his fleeing prey. The vineways were far too weak to hold the weight of a felfawn, but tough enough to trip one if its legs were caught in the tangle. The animal had to pick its hops carefully, and this along with its deep arrow wound was slowing down its retreat.

Despite his advantage, Debo cleared another thick group of trees and saw no sign of the wounded creature. He scanned the tangle of vines and leaves all around him, but saw no telltale droplets of blood and no freshly broken branches. He crouched low and listened quietly with another deadly arrow nocked in his bow. No sound gave the animal away. He feared he had lost it.

Quietly cursing his bad luck, Debo slowly stood. He hoped the other hunters in his clan were having better fortune. Winter was nearly upon them. Already, snowfall was sneaking through the canopy of the Mizzlemist and falling lightly. Most of the animals had taken the northern pass into the valley. The birds had all flown away, migrating to warmer climates. It was shaping up to be a very lean winter.

Before he turned to leave he heard a great rumble through the trees in the direction of the east wall. The sound got louder and louder until it culminated in a mighty reverberating crash that shook the leaves all around him. The wounded felfawn, having hidden behind a thick tangle of vines, darted out and away. Debo's first instinct was to give chase, but instead he headed east. He wished to see what had made such a raucous noise.

He cleared the woods' edge and saw a wide field of deep snow freshly fallen from the top of the tall eastern cliffs that bordered the Mizzlemist. Craning his neck, Debo saw even more snow still trickling down the rocks from high above. An avalanche, uncommon but not unknown in the high reaches of the eastern gully, had occurred much earlier than expected this year. The weather was dropping so sharply and uncharacteristically that Debo had more than once given serious thought to following the game trails north out of the gully and into Denshire Valley, even though the Wardens of the shire would not be happy to see his kind.

He crouched with his back against a sturdy tree and scanned the fallen snow with his eyes. It stretched for nearly one hundred yards from the forest's edge to the very base of the east wall. After a while he stood again. Perhaps he could pick up the trail of the felfawn and still give pursuit. The animal could not possibly have much more fight in it with the wound it had taken and the desperation with which it had fled him. Before he could turn to leave, however, he saw colors on the snow.

Something made him run. Though he couldn't quite understand what it was that he saw, he ran towards the colored flecks with abandon. The lightness of his body and the long shape of his feet allowed him to quickly run across the fresh powder without sinking very far. The colors came into focus as he neared. He saw various fruits, a tangled strap, and a pack that had violently burst open.

His eyes scanned the strewn debris with interest, and then he froze. Near the pack, sticking up from the snow and barely visible, were three pink fingertips. A lowlander, Debo thought to himself. A traveler on the mountain pass must have gotten lost and braved the snowy slopes above the Mizzlemist. Their foolishness had cost them their life.

Debo approached cautiously. At first, it was simply to retrieve the fruits and the pack, as the sweet fruits from the lowlands were a delicacy in the gully. He was also curious what other spoils he could retrieve from this poor traveler. As he knelt, however, his conscience began to tug at him. The fall was recent. The traveler could be suffocating beneath the snow. Fortune had somehow saw fit to drop this person near the very place where Debo had been after a wounded beast had led him here. It was as if fate itself were directing him to intervene.

Never one to question destiny, Debo dropped to his knees in the snow and grabbed at the hand. It instantly clutched at him and he pulled. He pulled with every bit of might he could muster, but the person was stuck fast and he could not free them. He dropped his hunting gear and began to dig, flinging snow behind him as he did so. Before long he had the arm free up to the elbow, and whoever was trapped beneath began to move their arm to dig with him. With a groan and a mighty twisting of his body, and with snow bursting out from all around him, a man finally emerged gasping for breath. His face was a bitter shade from the freezing snow that had trapped him.

Debo fell backward on his haunches, breathing heavily from the exertion. The man opened his eyes wide and stared. He was an older gentleman. Debo guessed he was from the southlands, seeing as how he had a thick growth of stubble and a much broader face than the shire folk to the north. For a few seconds the two simply stared at one another, and then the big man scrambled quickly to his feet.

“Kamil!” Nijal shouted loudly over the stillness of the snow.

Debo’s eyes widened as he realized that there must be another person trapped. He leapt to his feet as well and scanned the snow.

“Kamil!” Nijal repeated, sounding desperate. He started to move and immediately sunk in the snow up to his waist. Grunting with frustration, he freed himself and twisted in all directions as he looked all around him at the featureless mounds of white.

Debo continued scanning with his hunter’s eyes. If there was truly another man lost out here, Debo knew that he had mere seconds to survive; and this was barring whether the fall from the top of the east wall had not already claimed him. As Nijal started to trudge awkwardly through the thick snow back in the direction of the high



rock wall, Debo noticed a distant shape.

Looking like a bent branch jutting up out of the whiteness that surrounded it, an arm stuck up out of the snow. It was not moving.

“There!” Debo shouted as he bounded towards the arm, leaving light footprints in his wake. He heard the southerner continue shouting behind him, ‘Kamil! Kamil!’ as he raced to the rescue.

He did not bother trying to pull on the arm when he arrived. He just began to dig. The arm was completely free in little time, but unlike when he had saved the other man it did not move to help him. He soon had a shoulder free and then dug out the face, which was blue and expressionless.

It was a young man, no more than twenty years at the oldest. Debo’s heart sank for the boy. His mouth was filled with snow and his skin was pale. The hunter continued to dig, however, and before long Nijal had finally slogged his way through the snow and began to aid him. Soon, the victim was completely freed.

“Kamil! Wake up!” the older man said, shaking his frozen boy’s shoulders. Debo felt like it was a fruitless effort, but when he saw the love in the older southerner’s eyes, the care in which he lifted the young man from the snow and brushed it free from his legs and shoulders, he wanted to try to help.

“Bring him,” Debo said. “Follow me, quickly.”

Half-expecting the southerner to simply ignore him, Debo was heartened when the man hefted his boy and started to fight his way through the snow as the hunter led the way towards the forest. He wished he could help, but he was too small to carry the weight of a fully-grown southerner. Debo retrieved his bedroll where he had discarded it while helping to get Nijal free and then bounded to the edge of the trees.

Nijal followed and struggled in the foliage as it became dense. He was grateful that the little creature who was leading him was patient while he carefully picked his steps. Before long, they emerged into a glade that was relatively clear.

“Wrap him,” Debo commanded as he handed his little bedroll up to the man. “Wrap him tightly and then lay him upon the dourcap.”

Nijal followed the little creature’s long, pointing finger and saw a squat mushroom with a relatively flat surface. After wrapping Kamil in the bedroll, he moved closer to the fungus and saw that it had a black exterior and a reddish-orange stalk. It was giving off steam, just like dew on blades of grass when the morning sun clears the mountains.

The man could feel heat emanating from the dourcap when he laid Kamil upon it, and the soil beneath it burned like simmering coals. He looked around him and found the little creature that had aided him to be gone, so he lifted Kamil’s hands to his mouth and rubbed them quickly between his to warm them while breathing hot air upon them. His hands were like ice to the touch. His head lolled back on the dourcap and his eyes were closed. Nijal had cleared his mouth of snow, but it hung open and he didn’t seem to be taking many breaths.

Debo returned then, appearing from out of nowhere with a knife in one hand and a small water bladder in the other. The knife and the bladder both dripped with a viscous, clear substance. Debo, who was short enough that the cap of the mushroom on which Kamil lay came up to his chin, deftly leapt up so that he was squatting beside the young man and lowered the bladder to his mouth.

Nijal saw what the creature was doing and helped to tilt Kamil’s head back, lightly pressing upon his chin so that his mouth would open. Debo poured very small amounts of liquid at a time, watching to see if Kamil would swallow.

Weakly, Kamil responded. Nijal could see his throat contracting rhythmically. Seconds later, the young man coughed and sputtered before coming to in a world that felt to him to be filled with frozen pain. A great ache sliced through his head as he tried to focus his eyes. He saw two figures, blurred and faded, hovering over him.

“Drink,” the littlest figure said. The voice was oddly high pitched and thickly accented.

Kamil did his best to comply. He was able to swallow some more of the liquid, but lost most of it to a sputtering fit of coughing that caused further pain to knife up his body.

“That’s alright, lad,” Nijal said. His voice was filled with relief. “Just take a little at a time.”

Kamil was soothed by the sound of his mentor’s voice and continued to drink in small gulps, doing his best to hold down his coughs. He knew that it must be medicine to aid him. As he tried to focus upon his saviors, he felt his body becoming lighter and lighter. Soon, he was wondering dreamily how they had managed to lift him upon the cloud that he surely must be laying on.

“Thank you, Elys...” Kamil said weakly to Debo, trying to allow his eyes to focus one final time upon the blurry form that was offering the medicine to him. “I’m sorry.”

Debo shushed the young man and watched his eyes roll back. Nijal gently guided his head back with his palm until Kamil was asleep again. Color was quickly returning to his skin. For many minutes he stroked his boy’s head while Debo watched carefully. Finally, the little creature looked up and locked piercing blue eyes with Nijal’s. The two stared for a long moment at one another.

“Thank you for saving him,” Nijal said. Debo nodded in response.

“He is not safe yet,” the little creature cautioned. “He needs warmth and medicine. His body needs to heal. He cannot survive out here.”

“What do you suggest?”

Debo bit his lip. He knew what must be done to save him, but he also knew that it would hold danger for both of the southerners. Still, if fate truly did guide him to these men to be their savior, he felt as though the risk was worth it.

“We must take him to Glimmerden.”

Nijal knew little of Mist Water Gully. He knew, however, of the glamorfolk. They were secretive creatures that, while hostile to any who would encroach upon their land in large number, were relatively peaceful towards travelers who visited the Mizzlemist. The men of Valice often called them goblins. The men of the north bestowed upon

them the dark name of direkin. Mistrusted, they were left to their tribal lives in the gully high in the mountains. They had never posed any threat of invasion nor preyed upon travelers in the pass. Some people, overcoming the barriers of prejudice, even enjoyed lucrative trade with them.

The tallest of the glamorin, as individuals were called, stood at just over three feet tall. This was, however, when they were at rest on their oddly-shaped legs. Their knees were high up on their legs near their hip joints and the soles of their feet were long and ended in extremely strong toes. Coupled with their ability to run swiftly on the very tips of their toes, this allowed for fast movement and quick, high-reaching leaps, which made them impressive hunters and sprinters.

The glamorfolk were intelligent and fiercely tribal. Their society was built around clans which assigned an essential task to every member. A clan could literally fall apart from the loss of a single hunter or leather worker. There were no predators to prey upon these people and they lived safely within the darkness of Glimmerden, a network of caves that many thought to be the deepest in all the lands of Valice, Denshire, and beyond.

Nijal was surprised and humbled at the care that this glamorin showed towards Kamil. Though he knew better than to think of these creatures as ‘goblins’, he also knew that they would sooner tend to their own affairs than allow an outsider’s influence in their home. There was little choice, however, as Kamil obviously needed immediate aid.

He thought, then, of their errant companion. His mind raced back to their fall from the mountain slopes. He remembered turning and trying to halt Kamil’s tumble and seeing Elysandria jumping to her feet and screaming in terror for them just before the force of his boy’s descent knocked his legs out from under him and sent him careening down the mountain as well. He knew that Elys had not been caught up in the avalanche, but she was over a mile up the slope, alone, and in the middle of the fog.

“You must carry him,” Debo said.

“His name is Kamil,” Nijal offered, “and I am Nijal.”

Debo looked up at the man and offered a nod and the hint of a

smile before responding.

“I am Debo,” he said.

“We traveled with another. She is still up upon the mountain. I can’t leave her there.”

Debo bit his lip. “The east wall is too treacherous to climb. You face three hours of travel just to find a means to return to the upper slope. This boy needs to reach Glimmerden or he will die, and I cannot carry him.”

Nijal’s heart was broken. The poor woman had lost her companions for a second time. There was little choice but for he to carry Kamil to safety with Debo. He would immediately set out again to find her once he knew his boy was safe, he promised her that quietly. Debo watched the man, saw the anguish in his eyes, and reached out to tug on his sleeve in order to gain his attention.

“I promise you I will help you find your friend,” Debo said. Nijal saw the steel behind the little creature’s piercing blue eyes and knew that he meant every word of the promise. He nodded and lifted Kamil into his arms.

Keeping him as tightly wrapped in the little blanket as he could, Nijal followed as Debo led the way through the elder forests of the Mizzlemist. Trees jutted up into the ceiling of fog overhead that were so wide at their base that Nijal imagined five men standing hand-in-hand could not reach fully around their girth. Great vines stretched in all directions, many times wrapping like twine around the roots and trunks. Other vines soared high over the ground. There were many times when Nijal saw Debo leap up upon these vines to ease his travel. He knew that they would not support his weight, however, and did not follow.

Every second that he carried Kamil, he thought of Elysandria alone on the mountainside. He felt as though he had failed them both. He was their guide and he had chosen to take them down the slopes to the gully and now they were separated. Kamil had nearly died and could still face that fate. Most of their supplies were lost, including the hammer that Hickory had carried. Nijal’s eyes flicked down to Kamil’s belt. He saw that the young man still had Tol’s knife.

The minutes stretched into hours. Debo often halted so that he could offer more of the viscous drink to Kamil, who accepted the liquid through lethargic fits of wakefulness that interrupted long moments of unconscious slumber. Kamil murmured fitfully, but Nijal could never understand his words or what dreams or nightmares seemed to haunt him.

Nijal nearly ran into Debo when the little creature held up his palm. The older man stopped and scanned the tree line, adjusting his burden slightly so that Kamil and he would be more comfortable.

“Why have we stopped?” Nijal asked.

“Because we are being stalked by my clan,” Debo said. He turned to Nijal and beckoned him closer.

“You will be safe,” the little creature whispered. It was so quiet that Nijal could only barely make out his words. He had to lean close and watch Debo’s lips to ensure he caught what was said.

When Nijal looked up again, he saw glamorfolk everywhere. At least a dozen stood high upon the vineways carrying bows drawn taught with deadly arrows pointed directly at him. Still more hunters lined the ground between the trees grasping spears three heads taller than they were, honed to a vicious point at both ends.

“Take them to Glimmerden,” Debo said. The little creature’s voice had deepened and commanded respect from every member of his clan that was present. “Give them food, treat their injuries, and lock them in the deep cells. I will return to deal with them shortly.”

Debo turned and looked up at Nijal. His fierce eyes locked with the older man’s for a moment and then he was gone, having bounded back into the forest to the east. Many of his clan closed upon Nijal and thrust spears out at him threateningly. As he was escorted further westward through the forest, he felt as though one hundred sets of eyes were watching him.

Nijal was taken under spear point by the glamorfolk into the deepest forests of the Mizzlemist. After many hours of travel through the tangled vineways they came upon the entrance of the grand deeps that these creatures called home: Glimmerden.

They passed among humble homes made of wood and stretched leather on their approach to the gaping maw of the deep cavern; a surface village where the day's hunt was being prepared. Many hunters, both male and female, looked up from their toils in astonished curiosity as they watched the man being led towards their home. Nijal could see every one of them standing high on the toes of their long feet in order to catch a glimpse of him and his escort. He noted that few of them seemed to show anger at his encroachment. In fact, many seemed to show genuine concern for the injured young man in his arms.

His steps faltered as he passed into the darkness of the cave, so the glamorfolk escorting him paused to allow his eyes time to adjust. Soon, he began to see dimly lit lines snaking along the dark cavern walls like veins, which glowed with a dull florescence and led the way down into the deeps. Before long, Nijal felt comfortable walking at an almost normal pace as he descended.

He noticed that his escort had been reduced to three of the creatures. They kept their distance and, though they remained armed with spears and kept the weapons pointed in his direction, they did not shout at him or show any signs of trepidation when he often had to pause to make sure his footing was secure.

Nijal stared at the wonders that began to unfold around him. At one point they passed two carved, circular shafts that descended far, far below. Ropes were secured to platforms that moved slowly up and down these long shafts, and one such platform was being loaded with baskets filled with treated leathers by two glamorfolk. Nearby, a pack animal that resembled a lizard with a stubby tail and a large, bulbous stomach stared lazily as Nijal passed.

When one of his escorts spoke a word sharply, he realized that he had stopped completely to stare. He resumed his pace and his path took him near the lizard, which was chewing on cud and idly watching him with eyes that rotated oddly in their sockets.

They continued onwards until they began a rapid descent along a carved walkway overlooking a large chamber, and Nijal had to pick his steps very carefully. The walkway reminded him of the mountain pass from earlier that morning, only it was carved for folk that were much smaller than him and it was difficult to walk while carrying his awkward burden in his arms. Thinking of Kamil, he looked down at the young man's face and, in the incandescent lighting, saw that he looked to be relieved of the pain he had suffered earlier and enjoying a very deep slumber. Nijal wished he could awaken his foster son so that he could see the incredible vaulted chamber that they passed over.

As far as he could see, glowing in the natural light of the veiny cavern rocks, were rows and rows of cultivated mushrooms of all shapes and colors. He saw many more of the lizard-like creatures that he had seen at the lifts, all being ridden by glamorfolk through the vast fields of fungus. Many workers, dressed lightly despite the coolness of the cave, carefully culled and harvested, planted, clipped back, and maintained the fields.

Not long after having reached the bottom of the walkway, Nijal was shown to his cell. It was the tallest of a row of five, all of which were unoccupied, and despite its comparative size it was necessary for Nijal to stoop in order to fit inside.

He carefully placed Kamil against a wall and, after ensuring the boy was as comfortable as possible, took his own seat on the opposite side of the cell. For a while, Nijal simply watched him. He was comforted by the peace that he saw in the young man's expression. Without realizing it, he soon fell into slumber to rest from his long hike.

He was awakened when the cell was opened and a squat glamorin entered. She was adorned with natural trinkets made of feathers, hides, and furs that marked her as a shaman of her people. Nijal sat silently while she moved to Kamil's side. The young man stirred slightly as the little creature approached, looking up at her with groggy and unfocused eyes. She fed him some clear liquid, likely the



same as was given him by Debo soon after his accident. Kamil drank deeply and fell quickly back into slumber again.

Nijal recognized the ministrations that the glamorin performed next as she carefully felt along Kamil's arms, back, hips and legs for damage to his bones. Her look was one of careful concentration, slipping into concern when she felt Kamil's hip.

"His bone is fractured here," she said, pointing her finger for Nijal to see. "It is going to take time to heal."

Nijal nodded. He watched the shaman as she removed Kamil's clothing enough to apply an ointment to his skin. It was a thick cream, mostly clear, reminding Nijal of sticky molasses. She left the ointment in a bowl by Kamil and exited the cell without another word. The door was closed and locked behind her.

Nijal continued applying the ointment to Kamil's wounded hip as the hours passed. Periodically, the shaman and various other glamorfolk would visit and offer more of the liquid that caused Kamil to slumber. After a few more visits, a large supply of the liquid was simply given to Nijal to administer himself. Food was brought often and in generous portions, and Nijal would allow for gaps in offering the liquid to Kamil so that he would awaken long enough to eat.

Minutes stretched into hours, which stretched into two full days. No sign of the hunter that had aided him before and promised to return to 'deal with them' was seen or heard. Though Nijal often tried to strike up conversations with the glamorfolk that would arrive at the cell carrying food and healing supplies, none responded to him.

Nijal awakened from a long sleep on the second day to find Kamil awake and looking at him. The young man smiled and Nijal felt a surge of relief.

"Are you hurt?" Nijal asked.

Kamil shook his head. He was taking in the strange incandescence of the glowing rocks around them with a look of confused wonder.

"I imagined briefly I would fall through the world and into the abyss itself," Kamil mused. "It seems you have joined me there."

Nijal laughed. “We are with the glamorfolk,” he explained. “They have taken us to Glimmerden, their home deep below the Mizzlemist.”

“Where is Elys?”

Nijal frowned. He watched as the concern grew in Kamil’s eyes when the young man saw the same concern reflected in his.

“She is still on the mountain, I imagine. I have been unable to speak with these people since we were taken here. There was one, a hunter that saved us both from our fall, who promised that he would help me find her. But he left me to his clan two days ago and I have not seen him since.”

Kamil got to his feet and bumped his head hard on the low ceiling. He crouched and grabbed it with a loud grunt of pain. He knew he would have a nasty goose egg there.

“Careful, Kamil. Your hip...”

“My hip is fine,” Kamil interrupted dismissively. Truly, he moved to the bars that gated them into the cell with hardly a limp. Nijal was amazed at the rapidness with which he had healed. The ointment and the liquid that had caused Kamil to sleep so deeply must have helped his condition along.

Kamil rattled the cell doors and found them holding fast. Outside, a single glamorin warily looked in on him from many feet away. A long, dangerous spear rested against the cavern wall nearby.

“Let me out, please,” Kamil said. The creature grabbed his spear and, rather than advancing on the cell, instead turned quickly and padded away into the dark. Kamil watched the creature as it bounded away.

“Well, that didn’t work,” he said. He dropped to a seated position again at the cell door, and Nijal scooted over to join him.

“They have fed us well and have taken good care of you,” Nijal offered. “Truly, you were quite injured from the avalanche. You looked lost to me.”

Kamil noticed the pained expression on Nijal's face and his heart swelled with appreciation for the love his mentor felt for him. He reached out to touch the older man's shoulder assuredly and nodded.

"I remember little, but I believe you. We have to get out of here, though. We have to find Elysandria before she freezes."

Long silence followed, and no guard returned to the cell for over an hour. There were no sounds in this deep place. There were neither gentle breezes nor the calls of distant birds or animals greeting the dawn. It was deathly quiet with a looming sense of the miles of rock that lay overhead, separating the two men from the surface and their freedom.

A distant, thunderous boom broke the calm. Just as Nijal was about to ask Kamil if he had heard the sound, another shattered the stillness of Glimmerden. Figures approached on flapping feet, and a score of glamorfolk hurried by the cell armed with spears. Though Kamil tried to halt them to ask them what was happening, his pleas were ignored.

*Baroom!* came the sound again, closer this time. They heard distant voices echoing down to their cell through the serpentine corridors of the vast cavern. *Baroom!* The ground shook dully.

Something was coming. Nijal and Kamil peered into the gloom, awaiting the inevitable arrival of the source of the chaos that had erupted and was closing ever downward upon the cell that housed them. At first they began to see many glamorfolk. Some sprinted by, weaponless and with terrified looks upon their fierce little faces. Others backed slowly away from the terror that descended into their home. These brave few still clutched their spears tightly and pointed them into the darkness.

The object of the horror appeared out of the gloom. Its skin was black in the dull light, and it wore a long, silvery cloak that gave it ghostly wings, glowing as it did in the fluorescent stones that illuminated it. In two tightly clutched hands it carried a mighty hammer with etchings upon the metal.

With a fierce cry, the horror swung the hammer and struck the

ground with a cacophonous crash that shook the foundations of stone below them. Most of the remaining glamorfolk fled, their discarded spears clattering to the ground as they sprinted on long feet past Kamil and Nijal in their cell.

The two men both recognized her at the same time and their mouths dropped open. Advancing upon their cell, a look of fiery retribution in her eyes, was Elysandria. Her hair still flowed with red and orange hues like a river of fallen leaves, but her skin - that pale, soft skin - dimly shone and reflected the light around her like polished obsidian. She lifted the hammer and caught sight of Kamil and Nijal. With a little gasp, she quickened her pace. Kamil noticed that her moccasins were gone. She was barefoot upon the stone.

Some of the bravest glamorfolk were there to stop her. Kamil cried out as they lunged forward, their spears thrusting at her chest. The thick wooden poles snapped as the deadly barbs were deflected, and the shattered remains of the weapons slid across the cave floor. Elysandria's pace did not slow, and the creatures were forced to scatter out of her path.

"Stand back," she said through the bars, her voice as calm and beautiful as it had always been. Nijal immediately complied. Kamil, staring up at her in mixed confusion and amazement, had to be dragged away by his mentor.

She lifted the hammer back effortlessly despite its large size, and then swung the weapon with a loud cry that was punctuated by the horrendous sound of the impact. The bars of the cell bent and shattered. Kamil and Nijal covered their faces as splinters of rock and metal rained upon them.

The men scooted out of the cell and leapt to their feet. Both stared for a long moment at Elysandria's transformation, but she did not acknowledge their curiosity as she handed the hammer to Nijal, who readily accepted it. In the dull glow of the luminous rock all around, they saw that dozens of the glamorfolk had surrounded them. The little creatures stood at a safe distance and watched Elysandria with a mixture of reverent awe and horror.

"We must leave," Elys said. Kamil detected the urgency in her voice. He nodded and she began to lead the way out. The glamorfolk parted for her, giving all three of them a wide berth. Kamil rested his

hand upon the hilt of Tol's knife, which was still sheathed in his belt, and hoped that he wouldn't have to use it.

The walk out from the deep caverns of Glimmerden was slow, and all the while the folk surrounded them at their front and their rear, keeping pace but giving way like a tide of water that feared to touch them. Though many carried vicious spears and stared with fiercely defiant eyes, none attempted to attack. Elysandria's entrance and her seeming imperviousness to their weaponry gave them pause.

Elys stopped when they finally neared the entrance. Ahead of them were a dozen hunters with bows drawn and arrows nocked. Many more carried spears and stood in ranks barring the exit. At the head of them all was the shaman who had given Kamil ointments and aid in their cell over the past two days. She stood stoically with eyes that flashed with anger, and in her hands she clutched a tall war standard made of wood and bone. The very sight of the standard, the wicked bone bleached white with telltale stains of red, gave all three of them chills. Nijal felt it might be time to negotiate, but as he opened his mouth to speak, Elysandria preempted him.

"Get behind me," she said.

She advanced two more steps and the arrows rained down. Kamil winced in pain as one grazed his arm and he felt the wind of two more as they passed by his head. He heard the rending of Elysandria's cloak and clothing and the clack, clack, clacking of the arrowheads as they failed to pierce her stone-like skin. She stood her ground and reached to her belt, producing something and holding it forth as the glamorfolk lifted new arrows from their quivers to draw back in their bowstrings.

With a tumultuous roar, the war standard shattered. The shaman who had carried it fell to her knees as bone and wood splintered down around her. Elysandria lowered the smoking barrel of Kamil's dragon and pointed it directly at the glamorin's heart. All the others of her clan backed away from her, leaving the poor little creature to her fate.

"Move," Elysandria said. Her thumb ratcheted back the hammer.

The shaman dropped the remains of her standard with a loud clatter and complied readily. Elysandria led the way and Kamil and Nijal quickly followed her as she hurried through the exit. The

sunlight was blinding, but there was no time for hesitation. Outside the great mouth of Glimmerden, as the folk of the village held back their children with horrified, weeping eyes and the hunters watched with resigned defeat, the three travelers ran hastily into the wilds of the Mizzlemist.

Elysandria ran quickly through the tangle of the vineways, wincing as her bare feet were snared and cut by the thick foliage and underbrush of the gully. Her skin had quickly reverted back to its beautiful pale complexion after she had left the cavern, and Kamil and Nijal were still mystified by their rescue as they followed her quietly. The only sound besides the swishing of the leaves against one another as the travelers continued their hasty retreat from the deeps of Glimmerden was that of their labored breathing.

She continued to follow along the route as it had been carefully described to her until she heard the roaring of waterfalls. Cutting through the bushes, she found and followed a distinct game trail up and up a gentle slope. The vines and trees began to become sparser around her, and soon she led the way out of the thick, overgrown wilds of the Mizzlemist and into a vast expanse of open ridges and canyons filled with mist. Many rapidly flowing rivers rushed through the rock.

A series of waterfalls, far too many to accurately count, were spread out before them. The sound was deafening and soothing at the same time. The mists thrown up by the constantly falling, twisting, and wrapping water felt cool on their skin.

Elys led the way down a long ridge to one of the wider pools, which was fed by several waterfalls. At the far end of the pool the water cascaded over a wide ledge and deeper down into the maze. She sighed with relief and sat within the tall, soft grass at its edge.

Kamil approached her and saw the bottoms of her feet for the first time, wincing to himself as she slipped them over the edge and into the water. They were bleeding from numerous cuts and smudged black from the dirt and natural tannins and foliage of the gully that she had been leading them through. Elysandria rolled her head back on her shoulders and breathed a long sigh of comfort as the water began to wash over them.

Nijal rested a hand on Kamil's shoulder and the young boy turned

his gaze around to meet his mentor's. They exchanged a look of shared concern and confusion for what they had just witnessed in the deeps.

"Your hip?" Nijal asked quietly.

"It feels fine. I have to favor my leg just a little bit, but it was little bother even when we were running."

Elysandria barely heard them. She rolled her head forward again and stared into the water. Her feet shimmered beneath the surface and faded, and many thorns and stones and all the dirt and grime that had accumulated on them slipped free and were carried away by the strong currents.

The young woman sighed again and lifted her feet from the water, tucking them beneath her. Kamil and Nijal paused in their idle conversation as they witnessed an incredible sight: Elysandria's feet shimmered as though they were made of water swirling rapidly in a pitcher. The shape of them shone and glistened wetly and they were mostly transparent. As the grass beneath her dampened, it seemed as though the glistening, glass-like skin were slipping free of her feet like water into the earth, replaced with the soft paleness of her natural skin. Her soles, injured only minutes before, looked fresh and clean and perfect.

She looked up over her shoulder at the men, both of whom stared with mouths agape. Nijal's sly eyes belied an intense curiosity. Kamil's wide eyes made it obvious he was arguing with himself internally as to whether he truly believed what he had just seen. Elysandria smiled at the sight.

"I, like all of my sisters, was birthed within the Pale River," she explained. "I am born of both nature's beginnings and its ends. My body carries within it the stone and the water and the earth and all things both living and lifeless that make up this world."

"Sorcery?" Kamil asked as he sat down in the grass beside her. He had heard of sorceresses in the north that could twist reality into the impossible. Most stories depicted these women as beautiful and deadly, using their magical spells to lure men to their deaths in deep, dark forests. Elysandria crinkled her nose.



“It is not sorcery,” she said. “It is simply who I am.”

“I didn’t know that the D’wammish wielded such powers,” Nijal commented. He stood behind the two, leaning heavily upon the handle of his hammer.

“It is a mistake to think of the D’wammish as a single group of people,” Elysandria said. She lifted the dragon free from her belt and handed it back to Kamil along with the small leather bags of ammunition and gunpowder. He accepted the weapon with a nod of thanks.

“Southerners dub any who live within the Awakening as D’wammish, but it is a generalization,” Elysandria said. She glanced over her shoulder at Nijal and noticed that he was giving her a piercing stare as if he were judging the truth of her words. “I am of the Pale Sisters, those that tend the river at the border of our land. We are but one part, one tribe, of the Awakening.”

“What is the Awakening?” Kamil asked.

“It’s a forest that borders a vast majority of the northern edge of Denshire,” Nijal said, “a very ancient forest. It is off-limits to travelers under pain of an arrow to the heart or worse.”

“It’s true,” Elys confirmed, looking back at Kamil. “But we guard the Awakening for good reason.”

Nijal conceded her point with silence as she continued.

“It is easy for me to lose my concentration when I feel the rush of water, the strength of stone, the freezing bite of ice,” she said. “I fashioned moccasins of fawn’s hide to ground myself in this form of flesh. When I feel the youth and the life of them surrounding my feet, I can usually keep myself from taking on the stone of the mountains or the chill of the snow and ice.”

“That was why I lost my grip when I tried to help you on the slope,” Kamil said with dawning realization. “Your hand had felt as though it were made of ice.”

Elysandria nodded. She knew that revealing her nature like this

would likely distance them from her, and they had every right to be angry at her secrecy. If she hadn't hidden this aspect of herself, Kamil and Nijal wouldn't have very nearly gotten killed in the avalanche.

Most of all she knew that, like the many others who had come to know what she was, this would become a wall between them. It was why she took such steps to hide who and what she was when she traveled. The many stares and the looks of confusion, or fear, or awe that she would endure would eat away at her heart. She remembered the ways in which her relationships with Tol, Quassia and Hickory had changed when they discovered what her body did. Tol had begun to think of her as an asset to help with their survival. Hickory had stopped telling her stories as though he thought that they wouldn't interest her any more.

She realized she had been staring out over the pool away from the others for fear of their reaction, and turned to notice that Kamil was smiling. When he reached out towards her she flinched, but allowed his arm to slip lightly around her shoulder. He gave her a squeeze.

"Thank you for rescuing us," he said. Elys laughed brightly and brushed away an errant tear that had begun to slip down her cheek.

"Aye, good thinking," Nijal said with a grin, setting the hammer down and hopping to a seat in the soft grass. "But how did you know where we were or how to get there?"

"A little bird told me," she said as she looked out over the water with sparkling eyes. Something in the way she stared caused both men to turn to look in that direction and they saw, far across the churning pond and waving a little hand as he leapt up on a vineway that bridged the gap between them, the very same glamorin who had pulled them from the snow. It was Debo.

Nijal laughed heartily and sprung to his feet. He met the little one with a big embrace that nearly squeezed the wind right out of his lungs. Debo, demanding that he be let down immediately, brushed his leathers with an indignant huff and padded over to Elys to return her pair of moccasins that she had entrusted him to carry.

"No one was hurt?" Debo asked.

“As promised,” Elys answered. She accepted the moccasins graciously and returned them to her feet. The feel of the soft leather invigorated her as it once again surrounded her ankles and toes.

“Good,” Debo said with a satisfied nod. His attention turned to Kamil and he looked the young man over from head to toe with appraising eyes.

“You look alive,” he said. Kamil was taken aback by the statement and could only nod.

“Good,” Debo said again. He lobbed three waterskins at Kamil, who fumbled with them as he tried to catch them.

“Fill those with water, and then rest.”

Debo's piercing blue eyes scanned across the travelers until he was looking up at Nijal. The little creature pointed a long finger at him.

“You, come with me. We will collect provisions. After we return, I will lead all of you to the north wall and out of the Mizzlemist.”

Nijal nodded and, after a look back at his companions, he followed after the glamorin. Debo bounded away rapidly and Nijal had to quicken his steps to a trot in order to keep up. Kamil soon lost sight of both of them within in the dense foliage of the gully.

A long silence, if you could call the steady drone of the waterfalls that surrounded them silence, descended over the clearing where Kamil and Elys sat together. Eventually, Elysandria spoke.

“I went after the both of you when you fell off of the mountain,” she said. “There was a deep ravine. With the fog I could not see the bottom of it. I thought that you both had died.”

Kamil was touched by the genuine sadness in her voice as she continued.

“I gathered what belongings I could find. Much of it was thrown off the cliff along with you, but somehow I managed to find your dragon and its pouches half buried in the snow near the edge. I had some fruit from Nijal and plenty of water. The cold was little burden

for me.

“After following the ridgeline for a day and a half, Debo found me. He brought me into the Mizzlemist and explained what had happened to you. He knew that his clan would carry out his commands, but he also knew that they would be hesitant to simply set you free afterwards without a long debate. Many of his kin do not trust outsiders and would have preferred to drop you into the deepest caverns and forget you had ever arrived. So I volunteered to find you myself.”

Elysandria sighed, looking over at Kamil for the first time since she'd begun talking.

“It wasn't difficult to get him to agree.”

“Why is that?” Kamil asked.

“Because Debo reveres me,” Elys said. Her dark eyes sparkled as she lifted her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs before she continued.

“Debo calls me a meadow sprite and a spirit of the mist,” she explained. “When he witnessed what my body does, he fell to his knees in reverence. He believes it is his duty to see us through the gully to Denshire as part of a higher plan for himself and his clan. He has asked me many times for my blessing.”

“You sound as though you resent him for that,” Kamil said.

“I feel deceitful,” Elys replied firmly, “even though he drew the conclusions himself. But when I try to deny him the lavish praise that he wishes to heap upon me I can see that it hurts his heart.”

“So then maybe you should just give him your blessing.”

Elysandria shot Kamil a furious glance. It was the first time that he could recall her looking so dour and angry. He raised his hands apologetically.

“Look, I don't mean that you should lie to him about who you are,” Kamil explained, “but a man can feel courage and commitment

when he feels as though a blessing has touched his heart. Whenever I leave the inn, Nijal will shout after me. 'Be safe!' he'll say, and I always promise to be. In a way, with his words and my promise, I'm being blessed. I remember his words and my promise to him while I'm gone and I take care on my trip away from the inn because of that memory."

Elysandria's eyebrows furrowed and she looked down at the water. She sat quietly and thought about Kamil's words for a long time. After a while, she shook her head angrily. He didn't understand, she thought to herself. He didn't appreciate the way in which those who became aware of her nature would change the way they acted around her; the sideways glances she would get from people as she passed by them and the way in which a crowd would part before her.

She felt Kamil's arm as it gently slipped around her. She felt warmth and friendship and she leaned to the side to lay her head upon his shoulder. Glancing up, she saw Kamil staring out over the water as he held her in that familial way that said he understood her. Elysandria smiled brightly to herself and closed her eyes to rest as she realized something:

She felt blessed.

They traveled the breadth of the waterfall maze for the rest of the day, and just as the darkness of night began to creep into the Mizzlemist, the clouds overhead slipped apart. The darkening cerulean blue sky added to the beauty of the frothing falls and fast-flowing rivers that surrounded them at every turn as Debo carefully led them northward.

Many times, debates would arise between Nijal and Debo about their path. It took quite a bit of convincing before the glamorin accepted that the two men simply could not run along the vineways that spanned many of the rivers and ponds like Debo could. They were far too heavy to do so and would fall through the vines and into the dangerous, fast-flowing water. This made their progress slow, but steady.

Kamil took note of Debo's fawning over Elysandria. The little creature often matched his steps with hers and gibbered questions up to her, to which she quietly provided answers whenever she could. Mostly, the little creature seemed determined to ensure that every comfort that could be provided for her on their trek was seen to, despite her constant assurances that she was just fine. As he watched, Kamil began to empathize with what Elys had expressed concern about earlier that day.

By the time the sun had completely set, their clothing was drenched; not from any unfortunate missteps but rather from the large amounts of mist that were being thrown up from the many waterfalls and rapids. Due to their wet clothes, the chilling cold of night came early. It was not long before Kamil's teeth were chattering together.

Despite their discomfort, Debo forced the group along. It would do no good, he reasoned, to set up camp in the midst of the maze of waterfalls. The amount of blowing wind kicked up by the churning mists coupled with the gallons of water that would fall upon them in the night made camping there unfeasible, and a fire would be all but out of the question. Thus, he encouraged them onward. Finally, after a grueling climb up a dangerous ravine in near-complete darkness, they

were overlooking the maze from the safety of the wild's edges yet again.

A fire was kindled and everyone huddled closely around it. Debo passed around fruits and long plant stems he called 'tallvines' that turned out to be very salty on the outside with a crisp, sweet center that made Elys ask for seconds. An hour after their meal, the D'wammish woman was deeply asleep and Debo was out patrolling the edges of the camp keeping watch. Nijal found an opportunity to sit beside Kamil at the fire.

"I noticed that Elysandria was taking great pains to be next to you all evening," Nijal said softly.

Kamil knew where his mentor was going with the conversation. He picked up a small twig and snapped it in two, then threw both pieces into the flames. One of the pieces snapped loudly as it caught fire. Nijal recognized his foster son's discomfort, but continued anyway.

"Kamil, I admire the woman. She has a stalwart heart and never raised a complaint during our entire trip. She kept step with us despite the dangerous paths we had to take. But she is from a world that neither of us understands."

"You still don't trust her," Kamil said.

"I trust her, lad. I never said I didn't. But you've lived your entire life in a world that stands in stark, mundane contrast to hers. The difference could drive her away from you one day."

Kamil stared at the burning fire. Nijal sighed and gave his foster son time to think about what he had said. He hated to confront the young man, who was close to few others besides Nijal, about any relationship. But the only others of the D'wammish that he had ever met had not been pleasant company. Most were fiercely protective of their secrets, haughty in their attitudes towards 'southern folk', and altogether rude when it came to any sort of conversation. While Elysandria seemed to have none of these qualities, Nijal kept his heart reserved towards her anyway.

"So what are you saying, Nijal?" Kamil eventually asked, his eyes

looking angry in the firelight. "Are you telling me that we can't be friends?"

"I see more than just friendship growing between you," Nijal answered. "Remember, Kamil. It took a serious necessity of purpose for her to reveal her nature to us. What other secrets do you think she's keeping hidden?"

The question was left unanswered and the two sat in silence for a while. Eventually, Kamil turned and wrapped himself up in his bedroll.

"Good night, Nijal," the young man said.

"Good night, lad. Pleasant dreams to you."

Nijal stood to find Debo and offered to share the watch with him so that the glamorin could sleep, but the little creature refused and insisted Nijal needed rest more than he. Despite his trepidation towards Kamil and Elysandria, sleep came quickly and deeply, due in large part to the roar of the many waterfalls nearby lulling him into slumber with its dull cacophony of white noise.

Their glamorin sentinel awakened them just as sunlight began to touch the sky, and after a breakfast of strips of delicious meat prepared over the fire (with no spices, for Nijal's had been lost in his fall), they were off again. Their journey took them through what seemed to be the thickest wilds that the gully had to offer up against them. Tangles of violet and crimson foliage and long, never-ending emerald-colored vines constantly barred their progress. With everyone lacking Debo's ability to leap, walk across, and squeeze through such obstacles, new routes constantly had to be found. Kamil led the way, brandishing Tol's knife and using it to cut a resourceful path through otherwise impassable terrain.

"It seems as though neither man nor beast has walked this forest for centuries," Nijal commented at one point. For nearly two hours he would have sworn that for every step forward, two steps were lost while they were forced to backtrack.

Debo said nothing but trudged ever onward. Elys was equally quiet but kept pace with her cloak tightly held around her. Her



thoughts were turned inward for most of the day. She imagined the choice she would have to make soon, to either go home or to continue onward with her new friends. On the one hand she had her old life waiting for her within the great forests of her home and in the arms of her sisters. On the other, she had her budding relationships with Kamil and Nijal and a feeling of responsibility that she should stay with them to help keep them safe just as they had kept her safe. She imagined her choices on the opposite sides of a scale high above her, both out of reach until one was removed and the other was allowed to descend.

All four travelers were exhausted as their path finally led them above the tangled canopy of the wilds of Mist Water Gully. From their vantage in the midday sun they could see the vast breadth of the forest and the gaping maw of the waterfall maze. The mists that gave the gully its name swirled from the center of the maze. Kamil likened the view before them to that of a large, almond-shaped cat's eye with a rich, emerald iris sprinkled with violet and a narrow, bright blue pupil where the many waterfalls split the center.

"The north wall will take us the rest of the day to scale," Debo said during one of their frequent rests.

"We should be near the tower of Shire's Watch when we reach the top of this hike," Nijal said. "Do you see where the mountains are split by the canyon? Shire's Watch will be at the summit there."

Kamil and Elys followed Nijal's pointing finger. High above them and slightly to the east there was a large gap in the high cliffs through which the converging rivers of the waterfall maze rushed out of the gully. It was still quite a hike to reach, and Kamil was not looking forward to more climbing.

"Will we be able to see Denshire from there?" Elys asked.

Nijal nodded, and Kamil saw excitement twinkling in Elysandria's dark eyes. The sight made him happy despite his exhaustion, as she would always smile with a sincerity that had been rare to him until now.

Elys noticed Kamil staring. She had been acutely aware of his often wistful glances at her since the very first night she had met him at the inn. She was used to stares. Her hair often drew attention from

crowds, so she did her best to hide it beneath the hood of her cloak. Idly, she reached up and twisted a few of her autumn red and gold and brown locks around a finger as she felt her face burning. She was usually able to ignore the stares, but Kamil's made her feel overly self-conscious.

Their path took them ever upward. The sun had fallen far behind the mountains and it seemed like they hadn't even made it halfway to the cliff where Nijal had pointed out Shire's Watch. As darkness descended and their steps slowed, Kamil feared they would be stranded for the night on the mountainside. Determination began to fuel his and all of his companion's steps.

Deep into the evening they finally crested the top of the mountain cliff, and before them stood the tower that signaled the end of the pass between Valice and Denshire. It stood tall against the light of the stars and the rings of the Pike high above as they approached, their footsteps crunching in scattered, shallow pockets of snow. This tower seemed far lower in elevation than the south tower had been. The wind even felt calmer here relative to the rest of their journey through the mountains.

The tower was furnished inside and well-kept. The shirefolk prided themselves with comfort and style, and it showed in the donated plush pillows, finely-carved furniture, and beautiful tapestries that adorned the interior. There was even a fireplace with logs stacked beside it, giving the companions ample supplies to make a fire and cook their meals. Before long, the interior was toasty warm and filled with the smell of cooking meat that all four travelers indulged in vigorously.

"You have enough meat to last you four more days," Debo said, "and I gathered many berries and tallvines for you to chew."

Nijal nodded his thanks. "We will re-supply ourselves in Denshire," he said. "I know of a village not far from the roots of the mountains that will have everything we need."

Debo agreed with a bob of his head. He looked around and quickly leapt to his long feet.

"Where is the meadow sprite?" he asked.

“Up on the roof with Kamil,” Nijal answered.

Debo produced a growl deep in his throat. Nijal laughed and scooted closer to the little creature to engage him in conversation. Despite his concerns, Nijal decided that the young man and woman deserved some privacy tonight.

“Let me tell you about the Roukon swarm, Debo,” he said.

High above them, as Nijal related the danger that he and his companions were fleeing from, Elysandria sat at the center of the tower's roof. Her cloak was drawn tightly around her body but the hood was resting back upon her shoulders so that her hair could blow freely in the wind. She stared up at the Pike high in the night sky.

Kamil sat nearby. As he watched her, he was once again reminded of when he had first discovered her sitting upon the roof of his and Nijal's inn. He noticed something and reached out with a quizzical look on his face. A few strands of her hair, whipping freely in the wind, caught in his hand and he stared at them in the dim light of the evening sky. Elys didn't notice for a long moment, and when she finally felt a little tug, she jerked away instinctively, then gathered her hair up and held it self-consciously in a bunch over her shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” Kamil said, feeling embarrassed. “It's just that your hair seems a little different. It's darker than I remember.”

Elys felt her cheeks burning red.

“It's probably just the light,” he said and gave her an apologetic smile.

She glanced down at her hair. It still held brilliant reds and oranges and browns, though in the twilight they were muted and appeared burgundy and brown and black. As she ran her fingers through the strands she realized what Kamil had noticed. She smiled up at him and let her hair loose, allowing it to dance over her shoulder and once again blow freely in the wind.

“My hair is just getting darker,” she said.

Kamil tilted his head.

“It gets darker as winter approaches,” she explained. “Very soon it will be black.”

Elysandria watched Kamil, who quietly stared back at her. She began to feel awkward at the long stretch of silence and wished that he would say something. As she turned her head away to find something else to look at, he spoke.

“Your hair is like the seasons.”

She looked back at him and saw him smiling in the dark.

“I think it's beautiful,” he said.

At that, all Elys could do was look back up at the bright rings in the sky, finding solace in the Pike and hoping that the darkness was concealing her red face.

“Why do you stare at the sky?” Kamil asked.

“I find comfort in the sky,” Elysandria said. “The rings in the sky are where life came from. We owe our world, its green fields and bright blue sky, the white-capped mountains and all the silver rivers, to the Pike.”

“Nijal told me once that the Pike had been a sister to our world, and that long ago a great battle was fought between us. In the end we slew our sister, leaving of her only two ribbons of blood to forever light the sky.”

Elysandria stared up at the rings. On a clear night, sitting high above the world as they were now, one could clearly see the Pike's two individual strands of sparkling gold and silver hues. They flowed quietly and slowly from one horizon to the next, like two endless rivers of precious metals that sliced the heavens in two.

“My sisters and I tell a different story,” Elysandria said. “We say that the Pike is a great, ever-flowing river carrying with it the seeds of life. We believe that the mountains fell from this river long ago and landed here, carrying with them the trees and the grass and everything that walks and crawls and flies and swims and breathes the

air of this world. We believe that the river of the Pike continues to flow because our spirits, the spirit of every creature which passes away, returns to its embrace and is then borne to our world once more to live a new life.”

There was a long pause as they both stared quietly at the heavens. Kamil contemplated her story and eventually frowned.

“Your story is happier,” he said.

Elysandria laughed, and Kamil couldn't help but join with her. She scooted closer to him and again looked up at the stars and he, after a long look at her, turned his eyes upwards as well.

“Tell me about your inn,” she said.

“Do you think we can go around?” Kamil asked with his arms crossed across his chest.

The sun shone brightly down upon them, and despite their elevation and the snow that lay in patches on the landscape and in the trees, they felt warm in the morning light. Both men stared down into Denshire Valley from atop Shire’s Watch.

“Where would we go around?” Nijal asked.

“The mountains,” Kamil offered. “We could go up the pass and cut through the peaks to the east.”

“We do not have the experience or the supplies to cover ground like that. It would kill you.”

Kamil looked at Nijal, who shot a glance at him with angry eyes. The young man knew that his mentor’s anger was not directed at him. After a few breaths, Nijal’s face calmed.

“It would kill all of us,” the older man said.

They both sighed and quietly contemplated their options.

“We could go back,” Kamil suggested. “Maybe the storm has passed the inn.”

“Doubtful,” Nijal said with a shake of his head.

Kamil nodded. He knew they were facing more than something that would simply sweep by and be forever out of their lives. From everything he had witnessed and from Elysandria’s explanation of them, the Roukon would be there to consume them should they risk returning home.

Nijal squinted down at the valley and chewed on the end of his briar pipe. He had lost his tobacco in the fall from the mountain slopes, but having the object in his mouth allowed him to curb some of his frustration at what they faced.

Behind them there was a gasp and a pained shout.

“No!”

Elysandria had come up to the roof and was staring past Kamil and Nijal with wide, dark eyes that shimmered with tears. She slowly stepped to the edge of the tower and looked out to the north over Denshire Valley, shaking her head in disbelief.

The vast expanse of the valley stretched to the very edges of the horizon. On the north end were the vague, misty blue outlines of the mountains that bordered the far edge. Beneath the beautiful, distant vistas and the shining, near-cloudless blue skies, however, there was no valley to be seen. Instead, stretching from mountain range to mountain range were roiling storms of inky blackness. The dark, unnatural clouds twisted and writhed together over Denshire like a frenzy of asps.

Elysandria looked at that moment as though her legs were about to give out from underneath her. Nijal reached out his arms and Elys allowed him to embrace her as she buried her face in his chest. His big hand lifted and gently touched her hair, black at the roots and still bright and colorful like autumn leaves along the length to the tips. Her shoulders shook as she wept softly. The sight made both men's hearts ache for the young woman.

After a while she gave Nijal a squeeze and rushed downstairs. Kamil yearned to follow her, but Nijal shook his head. The woman needed time to process what she'd seen.

“Do we stay in the mountains?” Kamil finally asked.

Nijal bit his lip as he considered the option. There had been no evidence that the Roukon would climb the mountain pass, but he couldn't be sure of their safety if they stayed. The gully was a wild place, and filled with a people who would likely never accept them - especially after their dramatic escape from Glimmerden two days ago.

Debo was an ally, but there would be only so much that the little one could do for them. Fending for themselves in that vast forest would be very difficult.

“I don't know, lad,” Nijal finally said, sounding defeated. “I don't know what we'll do.”

Kamil snuck glances at the door which led down into the tower, hoping that Elysandria was alright. The minutes stretched on and on with both men saying little, and finally Kamil couldn't stand it anymore and made a move for the doorway to check on her. He paused when Nijal spoke.

“Now hold on, where does she think she's going?” Nijal said, peering over the edge of the tower with growing concern.

Below, Elysandria trudged out of the tower and to the north. She adjusted her backpack on her shoulders, filled hastily with a few meager supplies. Her jaw was set, her dark eyes steely with determination. She stared defiantly down at the valley as she marched towards the paths that would descend out of the mountains and into the violent, unnatural storms of the Roukon below.

Ahead of her, Debo stood upon a rock, looking rather tall with his usually bent legs stretching their full length. The little glamorfolk peered down into the valley, gripping his spear tightly beside him as he tried to understand the portent of the dark storms. He turned as Elysandria approached and hopped from the rock, landing in her path.

“You are leaving, now?” he asked.

Elysandria nodded and went to take a step around him. He hopped to the side and headed her off.

“What of your menfolk?”

“They are not my menfolk,” Elysandria said, and then regretted the sharpness of her tone. She took a breath before she continued. “They are free to go their own way.”

“Their way is not with you?”



Debo's head tilted to the side. Elys glanced over her shoulder at the tower, looking up to the very top and seeing nothing of the two men there. She squinted into the bright blue sky, sighed, and then turned her attention back to Debo.

"My way leads to death," she said.

Debo's piercing eyes flashed and he gripped his spear with both hands.

"Then you should not go," he said.

Elysandria knelt to look at Debo face-to-face. His knuckles relaxed around his spear as he stared into her dark eyes, and once again she saw the unwelcome reverence that he felt towards her. Reaching out a pale, warm hand, she touched the little creature's cheek and felt the tension in his muscles ease beneath her palm.

"Thank you for the courage and compassion you showed to me and to my friends," Elysandria said. "Go back to your clan and share that same open heart with them. Live every day of your life with that heart and you will be forever blessed."

Debo blinked and nodded silently. When Elysandria stood and walked past him, he made no move to head her off. She stepped lightly over the loose rocks of the pass, concentrating on putting one foot before the other, keeping her mind free of any thoughts towards those she was leaving behind.

Footsteps sounded noisily on the rocky mountain pass as Kamil and Nijal approached her. She didn't slow her steps, even when she heard both men shouting her name. They were behind her, keeping pace, calling out to her, saying things that she forced herself to ignore. She acted as though she simply could not hear them, marching north and concentrating on the sound of the pebbles rattling beneath her moccasins as they were shifted by her weight.

Kamil grabbed her shoulder and turned her about. She looked angrily up at him and he quickly removed his hand, his eyes a mixture of frustration and fear. Swallowing with resolve, she cut off any questions that the young man might have thought to ask.

“I am going home,” Elysandria said firmly.

The look on her face spoke volumes to both men. Her home, far across the valley of death below them, was endangered by the Roukon swarm that was consuming the world. Her heart was no longer with them. It was beating in the Awakening, encouraging her homeward to be with her sisters. She cared not for the danger that awaited her between here and there.

“I am going through Denshire and you aren't going to convince me otherwise.”

She prepared a dozen arguments, ready to shout them at these men until they gave in and allowed her to leave. She was angry that they would even think to try to stop her. They could carry their home with them, she had realized. Their home was wherever the other was, and though the inn was dear to them, it was not as special as her forest was to her. She longed to return to the beauty of the trees and the Pale River, the lilting laughter of her sisters and the smells of the buds that always blossomed there. She would save them or die with them.

It had taken the sight of the great storm of the Roukon between her and her forest to snap her out of what she now saw as nothing but a delirious disregard for what she truly held dear. She had given herself over to friendship once before and saw it destroyed around her. All she could see now were her sisters and her forest burning in the darkness and death that the Roukon would carry with them. She had to get there before them, whatever it took. And though these men had been kind and open to her, and she loved them dearly for that, she refused to allow herself to give in to that attachment again.

As these thoughts boiled in her mind, she noticed Kamil's odd stare. He didn't seem ready to argue with her, to list the various reasons she should value her life and not journey down into the storms. He just looked slightly angry and very confused with her. She parted her lips to speak again, and Kamil shook his head.

“We know,” he said. She snapped her mouth shut. Now she was the one to look confused.

“Couldn't you hear us?” Nijal asked.

Elysandria thought back. They had been yelling after her. She had heard her name many times, but had ignored them as she concentrated on every one of her steps. Her mind had turned and turned with the determined thoughts of where she was going. She hadn't cared to hear what the men would say. She had been frightened that their words would keep her here or that her heart would again feel the warmth that these two men had kindled there.

She looked up at Nijal and shook her head slowly. No, she thought to herself, I hadn't heard you.

“We said,” Kamil spoke softly and touched Elysandria's shoulder with his fingers, “give us a moment to gather our things, or we'll be going into Denshire in our skivvies.”

Elys realized then that both men were wearing the simple breeches and light undergarments that they had slept in. Their feet were bare and likely freezing on the cold mountain stone.

They had no intention of allowing her to go into Denshire, but she knew why, now. They wanted to accompany her into the danger. She felt that she should warn them away. Her mind turned back to thoughts of Tol and of Quassia and big, brave Hickory and of their fates in lower Valice. The nightmare of losing them to the maelstrom of chaos that accompanied the Roukon attack still haunted the dark places of her mind, but she could not muster the courage to ask these two men to leave her.

Instead, her heart glowed warmly inside her chest and she marched back up the pass, her arms lifting to her sides. Both men smiled down at her and spread their arms, and the three companions shared an embrace that marked a silent pact between them.

The world might very well be ending, but they would face that end together.

Debo left them that morning. All three had managed to thank him for his help, which brought a smile to his fierce little face. He had bounded away quickly and was soon out of sight as he returned down the steep cliffs to his gully.

The march out of the mountains had been a quiet one. Perhaps little had to be said. Elysandria, Nijal, and Kamil were companions in spirit as well as purpose now, and together they felt no anxiety or trepidation as they journeyed down the pass and ever closer to the storm-ridden valley of Denshire.

As they passed beneath the swirling lip of the storm, the first casualty of the Roukon that they saw was the vegetation. The trees were stripped completely bare of their leaves, which had then been scattered by the winds. The bark itself was even violently pulled from the trunks in long, misshapen strips that were narrow at the lowest point and widest at the tops. It was as though long fingers had descended from the storm and scarred the trees with jagged talons.

There was little light to be had, even in the middle of the day. The dark clouds were far denser than storm clouds, and reminded all of them of the seemingly impenetrable fog bank they had faced on their way down the slope of the mountain and into Mist Water Gully.

It had been many years since Nijal had ventured to Denshire, and nothing looked the same to him. The devastation had marred a land that he remembered as a green country with rolling hills dotted with beautiful trees and vibrant plant life. All that surrounded him now was a blackened wasteland. Everything was so dark and so devoid of life and color that it was nearly impossible to continue following the road. Its edges, once marked easily by the tall grass fields that adorned the entire valley, were barren. Nijal's pace was forced to slow as he continually had to check and double check that they were still on track.

"It might be best if we stay off the path, anyway," Kamil remarked.

“We are just as unsafe here as anywhere,” Elys responded. “The Roukon have no use for roads.”

Kamil had figured that were true, but had been grasping for some sense of safety. Traveling off the road felt safer to him despite his better judgment to the contrary.

“We will take the road for now,” Nijal decided. “It will lead us to Cynara. There may perhaps be survivors.”

Elysandria stopped in her tracks. Nijal turned to look at her, and noticed she was staring at him with frightened eyes.

“We can't look for survivors,” she said.

“Elys,” Kamil said, walking close to her and waiting for her eyes to turn to his, “we have to help if people are still alive.”

“No...” Elysandria shook her head firmly.

“We need supplies, anyway,” Nijal said. “Debo only gave us enough for a few days. We aren't going to be able to forage this wasteland for provisions. Even if we did find something edible that was still growing I think I would be loath to eat it. Cynara stands alongside the Peregrinate River. We can fill our waterskins there, at the very least.”

Elysandria stood firm, staring at the both of them. Nijal watched her patiently. Kamil gave her a look as though the decision should be obvious. She knew that if the Roukon still prowled in this part of Denshire they would assuredly be looking for survivors, and the last thing that she felt they should be doing is the very same. When she had insisted on helping the people of the western frontier, Tol had acquiesced and the resulting battle had nearly gotten her and all of her friends killed.

“Come on,” Kamil said, and lifted a hand to her. She reached out for it, anchoring herself in its warmth before allowing one foot to step in front of the other and resuming her journey.

If daylight travel was frightening beneath the storms, evening was

an absolute nightmare. It came early with the dense cover of the Roukon storm swirling in the sky. There was no wind and a dense humidity to the air that made it unnaturally warm for late autumn, meaning that a fire would not be necessary. Nijal was thankful for this. A fire would have been difficult to build in such a way that they could not be spotted from a distance, as Denshire had little in the way of natural barriers. It was a wide-open country, and often you could see your destination for an entire day's worth of travel before you reached it.

Kamil slept very little that night. Every sound caused his heart to begin to race, and he kept his fingers tightly locked around the hilt of Tol's knife. Even the very act of catching himself falling asleep would cause his blood to burn with adrenaline and he would quickly awaken with a start.

Conversely, Elys was the first to fall asleep and slumbered peacefully. Nijal thought that perhaps the woman, having seen the horror of the Roukon firsthand on numerous occasions now, had resigned herself to the fact that if they were to take her, it would be best for it to happen while she were asleep. The thought actually gave the older man an opportunity at some restfulness of his own, even if he kept one ear open for trouble until the dim light of morning fought its way through the storms above.

It struck Nijal how the storms, as active as they seemed to be high above them and with their constant boiling like thick soup stirred over a hot fire, were so very quiet. It was an eerie thing to see a phenomenon so monstrous and yet hear absolutely no evidence of its presence.

In the late afternoon they reached the shire village of Cynara. Standing tall in the gloom ahead, the travelers saw its familiar two-story inn. The two men were reminded of their home, and despite the danger they quickened their steps. Nijal's heart began to sink as they neared the boundaries of the village. The Wardens, ever vigilant in their protection of the roads and settlements of Denshire, were absent from its gates.

It was easy for them to confirm that the town was empty. They stood in the main square, carefully trimmed and decorated with what must have once been a beautiful display of flowers groomed lovingly along paths that wound between and through scattered, well-

constructed buildings. Most of the buildings were businesses of some kind, with housing built into the second stories.

“No one is here,” Elys said.

“It is as I feared, then,” Nijal responded, shaking his head and leaning upon his large hammer.

“No, I mean there are no bodies,” Elys pointed out, spreading her arms. “The Roukon leave bodies.”

Kamil nodded. “When I found Elysandria, her friends were all around her. They didn't have a mark on them, they were just lying there.”

He exchanged a look with her to make sure that she hadn't been stung by the memory, but Elysandria was nodding along with him.

“If this village had been attacked, there would be bodies everywhere,” she said. “It's possible that they fled before the arrival of the Roukon.”

“Or they found a place to hide,” Nijal said.

Elysandria felt a chill. It was possible that that was the case, and if so they were most assuredly dead. No locked room or sturdy cellar, however hidden, could save you from the Roukon once they have the scent of your life. Should these people have panicked and sealed themselves somewhere within the village...

“Let's look,” Kamil said. He sounded optimistic. Nijal agreed and led them across the square to the inn that he had known so well in his travels from long ago.

The interior was in shambles. Chairs and tables were toppled and overturned. There was broken glass, including the windows, and the odd smell of wood that had soaked in hops and barley for far too long. Kamil and Elys moved upstairs and checked every room while Nijal checked the common area, the bar, and the kitchen.

There was no food to be had and very little to drink. What Nijal did find, he did not choose to take with him. They still had water, and

all that there was to be salvaged here was some half-drunk bottles of various alcohols and a series of kegs. If there was one thing Nijal was absolutely sure he wasn't about to do while the world was ending, it was to drink the swill that the shirefolk passed off as liquor.

Kamil and Elys went from room to room. Kamil's hope dimmed further with every opened door leading to another empty room, until at the very last one he just couldn't will himself to open it. His hand rested on the door jamb and he allowed his head to droop as fear overcame him.

Elysandria approached quietly. She saw Kamil's eyes shut tightly and heard him draw a breath and hold it. He held behind his eyes, for one small moment, all of the grief he had felt from the very first step he had taken from his inn until now. Elys reached out and gently touched his back with her palm, and he gasped as he released his long-held breath, a tear falling to the dirty wooden floor below. Lifting his head, he brushed the back of his hand across his face and, despite the redness gathering in his eyes, she saw him mask his fear in the stoic optimism she had come to know him for.

He nodded confidently to her and she nodded back, offering him a smile that he readily returned. He opened the door and stepped into the last room. It was like all the others.

“No signs,” he said. “Nothing.”

“That's because everyone got out of here before they came,” Elys said. Kamil was comforted by the thought and agreed with her silently as they headed back downstairs together.

The common room was empty. After a quick peek into the kitchen, Kamil returned with a shrug. He wondered where Nijal had gone off to and lifted a cupped hand to his mouth.

“Nijal!” he shouted.

From outside came a strained response. Something in the tone of Nijal's voice made Kamil's hand go to Tol's knife and draw it from its place at his belt. He and Elys ran to the doorway of the inn and found Nijal just outside.



The older man stood with his feet planted at shoulder-width, gripping the great hammer tightly in both hands. Across the square, over ruined flower boxes and stone walkways, was a beast that stood easily two heads taller than he and twice as wide. It resembled a great bull in its shape and the way it stood, but where there should be skin and horns and hooves, there was nothing but darkness. It was such a natural darkness that it was as though all light were being quenched in the square where it stood. Two orbs of shining white shone in the creature's head, looking like a haunting pair of menacing eyes. Kamil had to blink many times and concentrate on those bright white orbs in order to focus his vision fully on the creature.

The Roukon lowered its dark head, threatening to charge as a bull would charge at a threat. It opened its big, empty maw and roared and the sound was like the growl of rock sliding on rock. It chilled Kamil's heart.

"Elys," Nijal said calmly, "what do I do?"

Elysandria seemed frozen in place as she stared at the creature facing off with Nijal in the village square. The growl continued and culminated into an ear-shattering roar as the creature suddenly bounded towards them.

"Elys!" Nijal repeated.

"Run!" Elysandria said. She grabbed Kamil's hand and sprinted with him to the right.

Nijal broke and ran in the opposite direction. Though seemingly made of shadow, the beast's ponderous steps still shook the ground. It had a difficult time changing its direction with all of its forward momentum and shattered the walls of the inn as it collided with the doorway where Kamil and Elysandria had stood moments before. Kamil glanced over his shoulder as he ran and saw the dark creature just as it leapt between two buildings. He did not see Nijal.

"We need to get out of here," Elys said as she led the way to the edge of the village.

Kamil snatched his hand away and stopped, causing Elys to slide to a halt and turn to look at him desperately.

“We can't leave him.” Kamil said, holding Tol's knife in his hand as if he were ready to wield it against the beast.

“Nijal must find his own way to escape,” Elys said, reaching out for Kamil's hand again. “He has given us a chance to flee the Roukon's wrath and we must take it.”

“No,” Kamil said. He turned and sprinted back into town, and Elysandria cried out to him as she followed. He heard her shouting after him but paid her no heed. The creature could just as easily have chased them, but didn't. If it had, Nijal would have found a way to stop it. He wasn't about to leave his mentor to face this beast alone.

He ran through the twilight streets of Cynara towards the sounds of the destruction that the Roukon was leaving in its wake as it chased after Nijal. Though he heard crashes and the loud, rhythmic thumping of the creature's shadowy hoofs, the maze-like layout of the village and the dim light frustrated his search.

“Nijal!” he called out against the loud sounds of the chase. “Nijal, where are you?”

He heard Elysandria running after him and screaming his name. He turned and bolted between two buildings and down an alleyway, pausing at an intersection of apartments. Looking to his right, he saw an empty cobbled street. To his left, he saw the creature.

The Roukon stared at him from the other end of a very narrow street. It seemed to Kamil that it could not possibly reach him, its shoulders being far too wide to fit in the narrow space between the buildings. With a roar, however, the beast charged. There was a terrible crescendo of shattering wood and glass as the shadowy creature rent the buildings apart while it barreled towards him, and Kamil froze in terror at the sight of the great Roukon bearing down. At the last moment he dove to the side. He felt a chill in his body that stole his breath away as the creature narrowly missed him.

He gasped for air and placed his hands on the ground to lift himself to his feet and flee, and was surprised to find two large, raptor-like feet before his eyes. He looked up quickly and found himself face to face with a silver-maned cliffjumper covered in

impressive plated barding. An armored woman stood tall in the saddle, looking down at him from the visor of a hawk-shaped helm. Long, bright red strands of hair rested upon her shoulders. In one hand she held the reins of the cliffjumper, and in the other she carried a weapon that had cams like a crossbow, but a trigger like his dragon and a long stock that rested tightly against her shoulder.

“Kamil!” came Elysandria's voice from behind him.

Still on the ground, he looked over his shoulder. Elys was sitting behind a similarly garbed rider on a golden-maned cliffjumper down the opposite alleyway. He opened his mouth to ask if she were okay when the great Roukon again appeared between them.

“Hey!” shouted the rider above Kamil.

The beast turned its ponderous head and beady, bright eyes their way. The rider above Kamil released the reins to level her weapon at the Roukon. It roared, and she pulled the trigger. There was a concussion of sound that caused Kamil's ears to ring as the air warped between the rider and her target. The concussion struck the beast and it stumbled to the ground, stunned but otherwise uninjured. The rider then transferred her weapon to one hand and offered Kamil an arm.

“We are leaving,” she said to him.

Kamil didn't argue. He leapt to his feet and accepted the help of his mysterious savior, hopping up behind her in the saddle. Unable to find a more proper place in which to hold on, he wrapped his arms around her slender, armored waist and held on tight as she clicked her tongue and led the cliffjumper away from the creature and down the alleyway.

The speed at which the mount was carrying them was astonishing and its gait made it difficult for him to find comfort in the saddle, which was obviously made for one rider and not for two. The rider rode with her legs extended, which allowed her to bear the bounding steps of her mount upon her feet in the stirrups. Kamil did not have the same luxury and had to fight to remain on the animal's back.

As they passed again through the village square they saw Nijal. He shouted something that Kamil couldn't hope to understand and began

to run alongside the cliffjumper, whose rider slowed generously to keep pace. A roar shattered the air and it didn't take a glance behind him to know that the Roukon was giving chase.

The other cliffjumper appeared alongside them with Elys tightly clinging to that rider's waist. Both riders exchanged a silent nod before the other cliffjumper stopped running. Kamil turned to look behind him and watched as the other rider brought his weapon to his shoulder. Careful aim was taken at the charging beast, and it took so long for the trigger to be pulled that Kamil called out Elys' name in fear that she would be overrun. Just as the creature was closing to within ten feet of them, the rider pulled the trigger and the beast collapsed in a tangle of shadowy limbs.

The rider then bounded after them and caught up quickly. Their saviors made sure to slow their pace alongside Nijal until they all reached the wide, fast-moving Peregrinate River that bordered the southeastern edge of the village. Not pausing in their sprinting gaits, the two cliffjumpers leapt and cleared the water easily, though the landing was so abrupt that Kamil nearly lost his grip. After Kamil and Elysandria were allowed to dismount, the male rider leapt back across and quickly retrieved Nijal. Reunited with his foster son, he hopped down from the saddle and allowed his hammer to fall to the soil with a loud thump before quickly embracing him. It didn't appear as though anyone had been injured.

For a while the three travelers and their two rescuers stared quietly across the Peregrinate back into the village of Cynara, the riders holding their strange weapons at the ready against their shoulders. They heard angry growls and the sounds of rampaging destruction which carried on for many minutes, but caught sight of the great Roukon beast no more.

Kamil silently watched the two cliffjumper riders as they led the way east away from the river. Both had dismounted and were leading their mounts gently by the reins. They had removed their hawk helmets and had rested them upon the horn of their saddles, and Kamil was struck by the similarity between the two. They were obviously siblings.

Both were shorter than he, but most shirefolk were. What first fascinated him about them was the fiery red hair upon their heads. The woman's was long, longer even than Elysandria's, and flowed well past her shoulders to the center of her back. The man's was just as impressively red but he kept it much shorter. It was trimmed neatly to just a few inches. Both had light skin and freckled complexions punctuated by bright, emerald green eyes.

Their armor was impressive. Made of banded metal plates over leather, it shone as though it were carefully cleaned and managed every day. The same could be said of the brilliant barding that adorned and protected their cliffjumpers. As for weaponry, they each carried the crossbow-like devices that had driven off the Roukon in a special harness attached to the side of their saddles. Kamil also spied long staves of tapered oak sticking up vertically from the back ends of their saddles which looked to be formidable weapons in the proper hands.

The light of the sun appeared on the horizon. Soon, green grass began to poke through the devastated ground here and there. As they walked they saw more and more trees around them that still retained their leaves, though they were drying and deepening in color due to the late autumn season. Before long, they could look up and see that the sky was clear above them. They stood at the edge of the Roukon storm.

"This is far enough," the woman declared, and stopped for a rest. The carnage of the Roukon attack in Cynara was now many miles behind them.

“You are all very lucky,” the man said. Though he had a serious, dutiful look on his face, his emerald eyes sparkled mischievously and belied a hidden smile.

“Thank you,” Nijal said. “We owe the Wardens our lives.”

Both the man and the woman shook their heads and raised their hands as if to wave off the gratification. Such were all Wardens of Denshire in their humility. The vast valley had been under the protection of the Wardens for centuries, and despite the apocalyptic arrival of the Roukon it seemed that they were still performing their duties amiably.

Kamil was star struck. Only one Warden had ever passed through the inn and the man, while polite, had not been interested in sharing stories or in favor of answering Kamil’s many questions despite how many goblets of wine the young man had offered on the house. He had heard tales of their prowess and their grand adventures in keeping Denshire a place known for comfort, safety, and peace. Whenever Kamil had been given the task of tending to cliffjumpers in the stables at the inn, he always imagined he were like the Wardens, forming a bond with the animals and riding them to every corner of the shire to drive out darkness and protect the innocent.

“My name is Kitarin,” the female Warden said. She tapped her gauntleted fist against her armor and lowered her head respectfully with her introduction.

“And I am Kesrin,” the man said after her. “I apologize for the dangers of Denshire. We are forced into a fighting withdrawal with these beasts attacking our settlements. Though the order was given to send Wardens to Shire’s Watch to warn incoming Valicians of the danger, our forces have been far too busy dealing with the threat to send anyone away.”

“We were patrolling the Peregrinate when we heard the beast’s attack,” Kitarin explained. “The town had just recently been evacuated and we wanted to make sure there were no stragglers that needed help across the river.”

Kesrin nodded. “Yes,” he said with his mischievous smile, “as I said, you were all quite lucky.”

Nijal approached and lifted a hand, and Kesrin took it and shook it firmly.

“I am Nijal. This is my foster son, Kamil. And this beautiful young lady is Elysandria.”

Elysandria nodded but said nothing. Kamil hadn’t noticed before now, but she was keeping the hood of her cloak over her head despite the return of the sunshine.

“Nijal Dorma?” Kesrin asked, tilting his head to the side.

Kamil's eyes widened when he heard the Wardens speak his mentor’s surname. He looked over at Nijal, who nodded.

“Welcome, Master Dorma,” Kesrin said, his voice even more respectful than before. “How fares the Inn at the Crossroads?”

“Overrun,” Nijal said sadly. “Lower Valice faces the same threat that is consuming Denshire.”

Kesrin and Kitarin exchanged very worried glances.

“We had hoped that Valice would send aid,” Kitarin said. “Our plan was to follow the Peregrinate River east all the way to the veil, and then follow the coastline south to Elderbrook.”

“The storms were ready to overtake the inn a week’s hence,” Nijal said. “At the pace we have seen them traveling, it is likely they are nearing Elderbrook already.”

“They move quickly,” Kesrin agreed, “though the river seems to have halted their progress for now. These creatures do not seem fond of water.”

Kesrin and Kitarin resumed leading the way to the east with their mount’s reins in hand and Kamil, Nijal and Elysandria followed along with them. Kitarin spoke next.

“We have done our best with what Wardens are present in this part of Denshire to patrol the edges of the river. Though we cannot

seem to slay these shadow beasts, our zephyrs do a fair job of holding them off.”

Kitarin gestured to the weapon in the harness on her saddle, the one that had saved Kamil and all of them in the desolate streets of Cynara.

“Most of the time,” the Warden continued, “It only takes one shot to disorient them and cause them to flee.”

“It's the sound,” Elysandria said quietly. All eyes turned to her, and she seemed to shrink back into the hood of her cloak. Her voice was almost a whisper. “They do not like loud noises. Though you cannot kill them or even injure them, they are greatly affected by sounds. Most of the time, a loud sound will just enrage them or send them into a frenzy.”

Elys bore to the side with her steps until she could lean against Kamil, who gave her a shoulder to put her weight on as he wrapped an arm around her. She was remembering dark days.

“The screams of those whom they chase...” she continued, “Battle cries and wails of pain... the Roukon are only stirred up by such sounds. They will tear the world apart to get to the source and squelch it. But a loud enough sound, a burst of terrible sound, will send them away in a panic.”

Kesrin and Kitarin both nodded in agreement. It seemed the two Wardens had come to similar conclusions in their encounters.

Wardens carried neither blade nor bow. Truly, few who called Denshire home had need of such weapons unless they were tools of hunting game or catching fish. Their zephyrs, constructed of treated lancewood by the Wardens themselves, were capable of disabling fire that was non-lethal to anything larger than a rabbit. The act of firing the weapon created a fierce concussion of air that scared away even the most feral of wild ogren bulls.

“Roukon,” Kitarin said. “That is what these creatures are called?”

Elysandria nodded.



“What do you know of them?”

The flashing of Elysandria's dark eyes beneath her hood told the Wardens that she knew a great deal. They appeared to darken and looked haunted at the memory. Kesrin noticed this and gave the young woman a quick smile and a wave of his hand.

“You may tell us later,” he said. “That way all of the Wardens can hear your tale.”

Elys nodded and a long silence followed as the travelers trudged onward. The Roukon storm began to fall away behind them and the bright blue sky all around was a welcome sight. The warmth of the sun shining down upon them through the sporadic trees of Denshire was invigorating and gave all of the travelers hope. Despite having descended into doom itself, their tomorrow had held brightness.

Through a thick copse of many-colored trees, the bases of their trunks surrounded by a thick falling of crunchy leaves, there rose a flat-topped hill with a ring of spruce adorning the crest. Marching about the base of the hill were more Wardens atop their powerful cliffjumpers, each of whom waved their arms at the travelers as they approached. Kesrin and Kitarin returned the waves and tapped their fists to their chests in a distant salute.

High atop the hill stood a conglomeration of wagons, carts, tents and many, many people. All were gathering at the slope to witness the arrival of these people who had been rescued by the Wardens. Some strained on tipped toes to see if perhaps these newcomers were loved ones who had been separated from them during the flight from the Roukon.

Three Wardens came out to meet them. Words were exchanged, and the travelers were inspected critically. The eyes of these fierce shirefolk warriors seemed to bore into them, as if to dare them to simply walk away. Kamil noticed that Elysandria was gripping her cloak tightly around her body and that she was still hiding her face beneath the hood.

Kesrin put in some good words and the Wardens eventually formed a protective ring around the newcomers to escort them up the hill. Their arrival at the crest was met with encouraging smiles and a few cheers of elation. The shirefolk, though often seeming haughty to

outsiders, were an endlessly optimistic people. Nijal saw many forlorn faces in the crowd as they gathered to greet them, likely from the loss of their homes or the dread of what they had seen or even the remorse for an errant loved one left behind. But every saddened man and woman also offered a quick smile when their eyes met his.

The travelers were brought to a ring of wagons. Supplies were being consolidated to four of the largest of the vehicles, and sturdy cliffjumpers were being fitted with harnesses to pull them. Many Wardens were gathered there, and all paused to salute as Kesrin and Kitarin approached.

“First Captain, your report.” commanded one of the Wardens as he broke from the group tending the wagons. He was a broad-shouldered older man with short, graying hair and appraising eyes.

Kitarin handed her cliffjumper’s reins to her brother and approached. She stood at attention and saluted.

“Warden Commander,” she said, “Cynara is lost. We happened upon three Valicians traveling through the village and rescued them from one of the shadow beasts. This one claims to know of these creatures.”

Kitarin waved Elysandria forward, and she approached slowly. She felt the eyes of the Wardens boring into her and a knot forming in her stomach as she lifted her hood back and allowed her beautiful hair to fall out around her shoulders. There were gasps all around.

The Warden Commander approached Elysandria and looked sternly at her before speaking.

“This,” he said as he dropped to a knee reverently, “is not a Valician.”

Wardens were arriving from all over the hill as Elysandria related the tale of her first encounter with the Roukon menace in the frontiers of the far west. Kamil and Nijal stood a short distance away and watched quietly as the spectacle unfolded. Each Warden that arrived would kneel respectfully before her and not stand again until she acknowledged the gesture. She looked like a queen accepting the audience of her subjects.

“In Denshire it is thought that all life springs from the Awakening,” Nijal said quietly to Kamil. “The people here believe that she and her sisters tend to the source of the Pale River, which is responsible for all of the beauty and bounty of the valley.”

“Is that true?” Kamil asked.

“It wouldn't surprise me,” Nijal answered.

Kamil sighed and watched Elys quietly. Her eyes twinkled in the roaring fire that had been stoked once the sun had set. Her hair was becoming darker, yet was still tinged with breaths of autumn. When her story finally reached the point where she had met them at the Inn at the Crossroads, she glossed over many of the finer details. As far as the Wardens were concerned, Nijal and Kamil had graciously offered to escort her home and that was the long and short of it.

Basil, the Warden Commander who had greeted them when they had arrived at the hill, addressed Elysandria once her story was finished.

“We must decide on a course of action that will ensure the safety of the citizens we protect here,” he said.

Kesrin stepped forward. “Can we not still make for Elderbrook?” he asked. “We could use allies in this fight, and they have a port. Perhaps help can be found across the veil.”

“It is possible that Elderbrook is overrun,” Basil cautioned.

“The mountains are not far,” a Warden in the crowd offered. “They would give us shelter.”

Elysandria spoke then, and many Wardens who had been murmuring or clamoring to speak instantly shushed themselves.

“I do not believe the mountains will be safe from the Roukon,” she said, then hesitated slightly before continuing, “Although, I have no proof that they will choose to venture there. We saw none on our journey from Valice.”

“If we go to the mountains and are wrong, we will be cut off,” Kesrin argued.

“These people cannot survive in the mountains in winter,” Kitarin added in a calm voice as she approached to stand next to her brother. “Elderbrook is the better option.”

An argument broke out amongst the Wardens. Many offered various input, most of which included a withdrawal to Elderbrook with all haste. Volunteers quickly stepped forward to race ahead of the refugees’ march to ensure the city was safe to approach.

Basil managed to calm the Wardens after a time and turned his attention to Elysandria.

“What are your intentions, Sister of the Pale River?”

Elys looked around at all the eyes as they turned to her. She could feel the stares of Kamil and Nijal boring into her back, but she did not turn to look at them. Instead, she lifted her chin regally and responded.

“I will return to the Awakening,” she declared.

“Will the Sisters come to Denshire's aid?” Basil asked her. A long silence followed as each man and woman present strained to hear her answer.

“The Sisters will judge the severity of this blight and act accordingly,” she said. Many of the surrounding faces became crestfallen at her cryptic response. Elys noticed this and her heart swelled for these folk, who only wished for the light of hope to grasp for.

“I promise that I will see to it that your voices are heard,” she added. Many of the Wardens looked encouraged by this, and a few even managed a smile in the firelight.

“We will spread the word and begin our journey east when the sun rises,” Basil said. “Send runners to the Wardens in the field and let them know we are moving out. We cannot hope to check the Roukon advance over the river for much longer with our ranks spread so thin.”

Kesrin approached and stood at attention.

“Commander, there is still the matter of the outlying villages and farm folk to the north.”

Basil nodded. “Help us get these people moving tomorrow morning, then take your sister and go,” he said. Kesrin nodded and turned, but Basil stopped him.

“Captain,” Basil said, resting a hand upon Kesrin’s shoulder, “I hope that your family is safe.”

Kesrin nodded his thanks and clapped a fist to his chest, then stepped away from his commander. He approached Kamil and Nijal and leaned on his fighting staff, looking spent. Kitarin joined him and gave him a rather informal, sisterly hug around the shoulders which made him smirk.

“And what of you two?” Kesrin asked.

“We go where Elysandria goes,” Kamil said. Nijal nodded in agreement.

“Where might that be?” Kitarin asked.

“North, with you,” Elys said as she approached quietly and stood with her friends before the two Wardens. Kesrin was taken aback at

her answer and bit his lip.

“Our family’s farm is two days ride to the north,” he said. “Should we be forced to slow our progress to escort you, it will mean more time that the Roukon will have to reach them before we do.”

“That isn't a problem,” Elysandria said, lifting her chin again in that same, regal way, “just give us some of those.”

She pointed at a stable of cliffjumpers nearby, some grazing on lush grass while others pruned the feathery fur on their backs. Kesrin looked at Kitarin with wide eyes, and she shrugged her shoulders back at him. The request, it seemed, was out of the ordinary.

“I will have to ask Basil...” Kesrin said. He sounded very unsure of himself.

“Well,” Elys said, flicking her fingers his way in a shooing motion, “you had best do so then. Your commander is a busy man.”

Kesrin looked uncomfortable at the notion, but he clapped his fist to his chest and left to find Basil. Kitarin watched her brother leave, then laughed and turned to Elysandria with bright green eyes that sparkled in the surrounding firelight.

“Basil won't like it,” Kitarin said.

Elysandria gave her a sweet smile, and Kitarin laughed again.

“You know,” the Warden said, “I think I like you.”

The two women walked off together with Kitarin speaking in a quiet voice about something that made Elys start to giggle. The young D'wammish woman said something quietly back to her and glanced over her shoulder at Kamil who, caught a bit off guard, offered an awkward little wave. Kitarin glanced his way as well and the two girls both started to laugh again before they disappeared into the darkness.

Kamil stood for a moment staring after them. He turned to Nijal with a thoroughly confused look.

“Oh, don't look at me, lad,” Nijal said with a shake of his head as he threw his arm around Kamil's shoulders and led him away in the opposite direction, “I don't even pretend to understand them anymore.”

For the first time since their fall from the slopes of the mountain pass, the travelers enjoyed good food and drink (though Nijal, being on his best behavior at the time, would have never admitted to enjoying Denshire wine). Despite the calamity that was befalling their homeland, Kamil found the shirefolk to be an amicable and positive people, always willing to lend an ear to his tales and then share two of their own.

Kamil almost felt like he was back at his inn, only this time it was his turn to be fed and entertained rather than tending to his customers. Many people came by the fire to greet Nijal personally, as his inn was a famous stopover on trips south into lower Valice. The older man graciously waved off the kind words about his establishment and himself, and always offered, perhaps a little too eagerly, a healthy share of the wine that they were all partaking in.

As the night wound down, the hill became quieter and quieter. Soon, aside from a few whispered murmurs here and there in the darkness, it seemed to Kamil as though he were the only one still awake. He threw some wood on the fire to keep it burning and then stood, stretched his arms and legs, and took a long walk around the hill. Though it was under the auspice of getting some fresh air before bed, he was truly just curious as to where Elysandria had gone.

He walked slowly, staring up at the stars whenever he was free of the firelight. The rings of the Pike seemed especially brilliant, slowly flowing by high above him and casting a soft, silver and gold hue down on the treetops and the long fields that stretched for miles in every direction. So lost in his stares was Kamil that he tripped over a barrel of spice and landed in the lap of a sleeping man, who had a few choice words about his clumsiness before he was calmed with a string of apologies.

Kamil found a stout tree to rest his back against, and he sat under its wide branches for hours. He stared southward at the silhouettes of the mountains, barely visible except for where the blanket of stars abruptly stopped at the point where the peaks thrust high on the horizon. He thought of home; of tending stables, sharing stories,

running errands for Nijal, and practicing shooting out in the yard on slow days. He thought of the simple life he'd had and of the dreams he'd always dreamt of having adventures just like his mentor Nijal and his father had always spoken of.

He thought of all of this but he found he was starting to not miss it as much, because what brought a smile to his face was dark eyes and beautiful autumn hair that danced on the wind. He believed that what he had seen today on the hill between Elysandria and the Wardens was the life that she was used to living. In this place, her homeland, she lived a life of stoic authority above the means and matters of common folk. He wondered if the side of her that she had shown to him and to Nijal during their journey was, in essence, the woman she truly wished to be that was hidden beneath that guise.

With a long sigh, he stepped away from the tree and continued his walk. After a circuit around the sleeping camp, and having not seen any sign of Elysandria, he finally returned to his fire and bedded down next to his mentor for the night. He lay there quietly, staring into the firelight that flickered in the darkness as it warmed his face, until his eyes finally fluttered shut and he fell deeply into slumber.



Nijal awakened to Chaos.

As his mind lifted from a deep slumber and his eyes opened, he was initially confused at the maelstrom of noise all around him. His eyes focused and he caught sight of the dreadful swirling of the Roukon storm high above. Slicing up through the morning sky all around him were long, thin vortexes of inky darkness that stretched like emaciated fingers, reaching up to feed the monstrous clouds.

“Nijal!”

Instinctively, he reached out to grasp the cool handle of his hammer and jumped out of his bedroll, planting his feet. The rush of blood to his head threatened to drop him, but he shut his eyes tight and shook the feelings of vertigo away.

“Nijal!”

It was Kamil's voice, rising above the din of terrified shirefolk from the center of the hill and the wagons there. Nijal turned and ran, twisting his big frame this way and that to avoid the overturned barrels and boxes and the scores of people who were frantically trying to gather their families together.

To his right he saw the hulking form of a Roukon plowing through the crowd. In its wake, fresh tendrils of wispy blackness started their long journey into the sky to further feed the storm. It looked to him like the beast they had encountered in Cynara; only its legs were grossly elongated, giving it a terrifyingly unnatural look.

He heard more of the creatures on the slopes of the hill behind him, but his focus was forward. As he ran, he strained to hear the sound of Kamil's voice again over the screams and crashes and the loud, rumbling roars of the attacking swarm.

He closed on the wagons at the center of the hill that had been

loaded with provisions the night before. Basil was directing a handful of the Wardens as they hastily threw provisions off of one of the wagons. Many of the vehicles were vacant, and still others were in the process of having townsfolk loaded into them with Wardens at the reins preparing to leave. Despite the chaos, the protectors of Denshire were doing a fine job getting people loaded up in as orderly a fashion as were possible. What panic the citizens were feeling would wash away at the sight of their Wardens calmly leading them to safety.

“Go! Go, now!” Basil shouted. The two Wardens upon the coach nodded and snapped their reins, and the cliffjumpers that had been harnessed to the wagon lurched forward with their burden. Two other Wardens, armed with readied zephyrs, leapt upon the back and covered the vehicle as it trundled away quickly. The people inside held on tightly as they bounced with the ruts and divots of the hill.

In every direction the air was blasted by a cacophony of zephyrs being fired, followed many times by the angry, defiant roars of the Roukon. It sounded to Nijal as if the entire world were ending right at that very moment.

He shouted Basil’s name. The man looked up and acknowledged him, still waving with his arms and shouting orders as he did so.

“Where is Elysandria?” Basil asked. Nijal stumbled over his words. He had been about to ask the same thing.

“I don't know!” Nijal shouted in response. “Have you seen Kamil?”

Basil nodded. “He was placed in one of the wagons,” the commander said. “He was injured helping us drive off some of the first attackers, but I believe he will be all right.”

Nijal breathed a sigh of relief. Nearby, a woman led a group of children as they hopped one by one into a wagon. Her eyes met Nijal’s and he gave her an encouraging smile before bending down and helping to lift the littlest boys and girls up and over the side. All of the children were dressed in fancy uniforms, leading Nijal to surmise that they were part of the same classroom.

The wagon quickly filled up with passengers and Basil shouted to the drivers to go. The Wardens sitting on the coach saluted, snapped

the reins, and trundled off.

“We are running out of wagons,” Basil said after Nijal approached him again. “There are many more people out there...”

Nijal's mind raced. What plans he could have made, however, were forgotten when he caught sight of three monstrous Roukon wreaking havoc up the side of the hill in the same direction from which he had fled. They were too fast for the poor shirefolk who tried to outrun them, and Nijal saw many men and women disappear under their thumping, heavy hooves of dark shadow.

“We have to go,” Nijal said. Basil nodded his agreement, looking grave. He turned to the group of Wardens who were still hastily unloading a nearby wagon of unnecessary provisions.

“Last wagon!” he shouted to them. They clapped their fists against their chests in acknowledgement of the order.

Screams and a dual firing of zephyrs nearby drew Basil and Nijal's attention. A Roukon, prowling low to the ground with an elongated body that reminded Nijal of a lynx were it not for the shadowy nothingness that consumed its body, launched itself at the escaping wagon that was filled with children. The Wardens at the front were both caught up in the attack and fell to the side in a blur of clanking armor and loud, pained screams. The wagon hit a rut, bounced once, and dragged to a halt. Its cliffjumper pullers immediately stopped moving and looked on the verge of panic.

Basil was screaming orders, but Nijal didn't hear him. He was already off, racing across the soft grass towards the wagon. Already, another of the beasts was slinking closer. The woman within did her best to move the wailing children away from the side in a futile gesture to protect them. Nijal hefted his great hammer and, roaring like a Ro barbarian, swung it with such force that the heavy head threatened to lift his feet from the ground.

He felt the weapon connect and there was a bright flash of light. The creature's deep growl stopped suddenly, leaving Nijal's ears ringing. He stumbled, lost his grip on the hammer, and nearly tripped over the handle as he passed. With a backward stare, he saw the weapon fall to the ground in the grass next to the Roukon, which lay still. Nijal's strike had killed it.

Lifting his eyes from where the weapon lay, he spied two more of the creatures prowling ever closer. The Wardens upon the back of the wagon lifted their weapons and fired, and the beasts howled and backed away, their menacing eyes still focused on the shirefolk in the wagon who were trying to flee from them. As more Roukon approached and the Wardens struggled to reload their weapons quickly, the frightened cries of the children made up Nijal's mind for him. He left the hammer where it lay, hopped into the wagon, and snapped the reins. There was a great lurch as the wheel bounced free of the rut that had halted its progress, and soon they were once again barreling down the side of the hill towards the east and safety.

He saw a streak of red as two cliffjumpers bounded past, their riders hefting zephyrs to protect the fleeing wagons from their pursuers. He recognized the riders and cupped a hand to his mouth.

“Elys!” he shouted after them, “Kitarin!”

Their zephyrs fired, one after the other, drowning out his voice. He could not afford to stop the wagon and could only watch over his shoulder as their mounts carried them back into the center of the hill towards the throng of Roukon.

Kitarin moved to head off Elysandria and both of their cliffjumpers slid to a stop. She assessed her surroundings. One final wagon, covered by two Wardens and with Basil sitting inside among many shirefolk, was beginning on its way. People were doing their best to flee the crest of the hill on foot, but they could not run fast enough to escape the Roukon and the Wardens were spread far too thin trying to defend them.

“Elys,” the Warden said as she pulled the lever back on her weapon to reload it, “stagger your shot after mine. Give me time to reload while you fire, and I will do the same with you.

Elysandria nodded, but her head was whipping this way and that as she scanned the crowd.

“Elys!” Kitarin shouted. The young woman's dark eyes locked with hers. “Kamil and Nijal are going to make it. We need to focus on getting out of here ourselves.”

Elysandria nodded again, only this time Kitarin was sure that the woman had understood her words. With a snapping of its cams, the Warden's weapon was ready to fire. Kitarin clicked her tongue, and her cliffjumper resumed bounding towards the center of the hill.

"Wardens! Rally!" Kitarin shouted. Elys rode up beside her and lifted her weapon, firing it at a lumbering Roukon that had taken notice of the beautiful Warden's clarion voice rising over the battle. The beast retreated backwards and quickly decided there was easier prey to be found elsewhere on the hill.

Many Wardens saw their captain and wheeled their mounts around to get to her. Coordinated zephyr shots were fired, drawing the attention of others, and soon all of the Wardens who were still in the fight were gathered.

"Split up and cover a lane along the path of that last wagon," Kitarin ordered. "We cannot save all of these people, but we will plough a road for those who can make it. Elys, go with the Wardens and aid them."

Elysandria began to protest.

"Go!" she said, and she threw off her helmet. It clattered to the ground, and her bright red hair glowed like a beacon in stark contrast to the growing darkness of the Roukon attack. She clicked her tongue and was off, barreling back towards the crest of the hill on her cliffjumper and shouting in a voice that rang out like a bell over the field of battle.

"To me!" she cried, "to me!"

As the shirefolk noticed their Warden Captain and began to run to her, the other Wardens rode off to follow her orders. Elys joined them and followed the path of the final wagon, which was now halfway down the hill. She fired her zephyr with the others to keep the lane clear for the fleeing shirefolk, and people began to race through the opening to the east as they realized what the Wardens were doing for them. Children were snapped up quickly by adults. Those too frail or injured to run found themselves clinging to Wardens who had lifted them into their saddles.

Kesrin saw his sister and called out to her, but she could not hear him. He watched her proudly from the saddle of his cliffjumper, which stood upon the wreckage of one of the wagons at the center of the hill that had not been emptied in time of its provisions. The wagon was surrounded by a sea of Roukon. He was cut off from escape and knew that he was doomed to perish there, but was confident that he had done his part to ensure the safety of his kinfolk.

“The speed of the great Peregrinate be with you, sister,” he said.

The wagon lurched as one of the Roukon dared to approach and take him. Kesrin spun in his saddle and fired his zephyr, sending the creature and many who had been prepared to follow it reeling backward in confusion and pain. He worked fast to reload the weapon, pulling its lever back and straining with the effort. The Roukon, noticing the lull, began to close on him again. His cliffjumper hissed and shifted beneath him as if it were ready to bolt.

“Easy, girl,” Kesrin said. A loud snap told him his weapon was loaded and ready, and he quickly lifted it and pulled the trigger.

The air was split again by the sound of his zephyr. It cut a swath into the swarm and many creatures fled the sound, but the clearing was filled as other Roukon clamored into the open spaces and ever closer.

Kesrin placed the stock of the weapon against his shoulder and began to reload again. Each time, the lever felt harder to pull back. Each time he fired, the Roukon closed more of the distance. It wouldn't be long before they reached him.

His cliffjumper began to hiss and buck beneath him, and Kesrin feared that he would lose his balance. Eschewing a reload and wishing his companion some peace before the pain of death took them both, he bent down and placed a calming palm upon its neck. The creature nuzzled into the gesture, seeking the comfort of its master. There was little that Kesrin could give.

He turned in time to see the Roukon before it pounced. Though it was unloaded, he instinctively lifted his zephyr to fire and closed his eyes tightly against the end that came. The creature's roar grew ever

nearer, but it was cut off suddenly with a bright flash of light.

Kesrin opened his eyes in confusion. The Roukon was carried by its momentum for two stumbling steps before it collapsed at the cliffjumper's feet with the handle of an elegant knife jutting out of its chest. Nearby, curled up against a crate, Kamil was gripping his wrist in pain. It had been violently twisted and wrenched when he had stabbed the creature. Kesrin could see that the young man had been gravely injured. His leg was in a tatter and blood oozed from just over one of his eyes, nearly blinding him.

Feeling a burst of resolve, Kesrin yanked back the lever on his zephyr and heard it snap to the ready position. He reached his hand down to Kamil and ensured that the young man had a firm grip on his forearm before he pulled him up and behind him in the saddle. Scanning the hopelessly dense swarm around them, he clicked his tongue and gestured. It was all that his cliffjumper needed to hear.

Deftly, the animal bounded from the overturned wagon and hopped along two abandoned stacks of barrels before leaping to another wagon. The Roukon swarm roared in unison, sounding like an angry landslide, and followed their prey like a great ripple of water. Hopping to an empty bit of ground, the brave cliffjumper charged up the side of a far-leaning post that had once been part of a frame to one of the Warden's many tents. The post faltered and began to snap under the weight.

“Hold on!” Kesrin shouted behind him as he lifted his weapon. He cleared a temporary path with a well-placed shot just as his cliffjumper leapt over the heads of the ravenous swarm. The Roukon gnashed their shadowy teeth upwards at their prey as it continued to elude them.

Kesrin had to hastily toss his weapon aside in order to hang on to the animal's neck before it landed. He felt only one of Kamil's arms tighten around his waist and hoped that the young man had a good grip. The ground came up at them and the cliffjumper hissed in pain with the impact. It faltered and seemed to Kesrin as though it would lose its footing and throw both riders from the saddle, but the stalwart animal caught its steps and raced away, heavily favoring one of its legs.

Angry roars rose up behind them, sounding as though a mountain

were collapsing down upon their heads. Kesrin dared not look back and simply patted his mount's neck, egging it forward and clicking his tongue in encouragement. While the animal courageously limped onward, he could hear the Roukon closing. He didn't feel that they would reach safety before the swarm overtook them.

Kesrin heard a click followed by a tumultuous roar behind him that sent his ears ringing, drowning out the terrifying sounds of the angry creatures that pursued them. He looked over his shoulder in astonished confusion.

He saw Kamil turned around in the saddle and staring over the smoking barrel of his dragon as the lead Roukon stumbled and fell to the ground with a violent burst of dust. Its great body snapped a young tree in half as it barreled through it. Many of the other Roukon were tripped up by the faltering creature, and the horde that chased them seemed to hesitate.

Kamil lowered his weapon and stared behind them, one arm tightly wrapped around Kesrin as the cliffjumper carried them away from the battle. For miles the creature limped as it painfully ferried its burden northward. The Roukon did not follow.



"I don't understand. Why are we going back?"

Elysandria was doing her best to coax her cliffjumper into keeping up with Kitarin's. The Warden's jaw was set and she was staring westward as they bounded across the soft, grassy fields of Denshire. After having overseen the escape of many of the refugees, Kitarin had quickly whipped her mount around and headed right back to where the battle had taken place.

"Kitarin!" Elysandria shouted. "Stop!"

Kitarin yanked hard on her reins with a growl of frustration, and her mount hissed as it slid rapidly to a halt. She spun in the saddle and glared at Elys.

"My brother is not with the wagons," she said.

"If he is back there, he is dead."

Elysandria watched as the woman's fierce expression turned from her to the great storm that swirled over the place in the distant west where they and all the refugees of Denshire had camped the night before. For a long moment she stared, and Elys held her breath and bit her lip, hoping that her words had not stung the Warden too harshly.

Kitarin shook her head. "No," she said as she started on her way to the west again, more slowly this time. "If he were dead, I think I would know it."

With a click of her tongue, Elysandria was able to quicken the steps of her cliffjumper enough so that she could ride beside the Warden. She quietly took in the determined expression on the woman's face as they rode. Just as she was about to say something further, Kitarin turned her bright green eyes upon her once again. The words caught in Elys' throat.

“What of your friends?” Kitarin asked.

Elysandria's heart twisted in her chest.

“Did you see them amongst the refugees?” Kitarin continued. “Do you know that they are safe?”

Elysandria looked over her shoulder and back to the east in the direction that the wagons had fled. She had seen neither Kamil nor Nijal there, but she had only been afforded a very brief look before she had noticed that Kitarin was racing away and had followed after her, determined to convince her to turn back.

“If they lived through the attack, they're with the refugees,” Elys said quietly.

Kitarin's expression softened when she saw the fear in Elysandria's dark eyes. The pace of her cliffjumper's gait slowed further as she relaxed her pull on the reins. Both women traveled at a soft canter together as Elys allowed Kitarin to consider her actions.

“The Roukon rarely leave survivors,” the D'wammish woman said after a long moment. “You cannot hide from them. Everyone who lived through that attack will be with the wagons. If we ride back into that storm, the Roukon will have us too.”

The Warden's eyes burned as though she were ready to scream with angry frustration. She pulled hard on the reins, and for a moment Elysandria felt relief as she thought that she had convinced her to go back to the wagons. Instead, Kitarin altered her mount's path and started racing northward. Elys had to struggle again with her cliffjumper to catch back up to her.

“Go back to the wagons,” Kitarin said when she noticed Elysandria was still following her.

“No.”

“Go back!” Kitarin shouted with an angry look.

“No!”

“Elys, get away from me!” Kitarin growled.

“I’ll go back when you go back!”

The women both had to duck as they raced into a glade of young trees with low branches. Their cliffjumpers took them on a route along cresting hills and deep, winding paths that twisted and writhed through a very dense pocket of underbrush. The mounts were well-trained, and safely saw their riders through.

“I’m not going back,” Kitarin said after they had once again emerged into the open plains.

Elysandria was confused. “What do you mean you aren’t going back,” she asked.

“If Kesrin is alive and he is not with the refugees, then he is headed north to warn the outlying settlements.”

Kitarin bent low in the saddle, looking determined.

“And if he is dead,” she added, “it falls to me to make it there and warn them myself.”

For several long, quiet minutes, Kitarin continued riding hard to the north. She passed through a cairns field covered in a low, early-morning mist. Chalk-white stones jutted up sharply from the grass, many heads taller than she even while she was mounted. The stones were weathered heavily by age and the winds of Denshire, and all were marked with ornate crests denoting the many families that had passed this way long ago to settle the southern part of the wide valley.

Elysandria had obviously given up on her, the Warden thought to herself. It was just as well. Her quest would likely lead her straight into the waiting shadow of the Roukon swarm that was consuming her homeland. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure and she gasped.

Her companion was still there, keeping pace just behind her. Elys offered her a bright, reassuring smile that brought sudden tears to her eyes. She pursed her lips and nodded, turning her attention back to the path that they both traversed northward. She couldn’t bring

herself to argue any further and truthfully, she silently welcomed the company.

For the rest of the morning they bounded through open fields and dense yet relatively small forests of spruce and thick oak trees. In the afternoon they passed through a long, shallow canyon of stone and brush, and only stopped briefly to water and rest their cliffjumpers by a pond that, to Elysandria's delight, was well-populated with frogs who croaked angrily at the unwelcome infringement on their territory.

Ever present on the western horizon, the unnatural storm of the Roukon colored the sky. Elys' eyes often lingered there, and she struggled not to feel despair at the futility of their flight. No matter how far they ran, the Roukon would always be there coloring the horizon with the threat of death and the constant fear of their inevitable arrival. It sent a chill up Elysandria's spine every time her mind went to that dark place, and it took every ounce of will to tear her eyes from the horrible sight of the dark clouds.

Kitarin slowed in the early evening when they reached a stone bridge that crossed a deep part of the Peregrinate River. The river was narrow at this point and the water rushed through the arches of the bridge with a vicious roar. About one hundred yards downstream there was a small wooden boathouse with a dock, and tied to the dock was a single, small canoe.

"Wardens should be guarding this bridge," Kitarin said. She stopped her cliffjumper and dismounted.

Elysandria lifted the zephyr from where it rested in its harness on the side of her saddle and pulled back the lever until the cams snapped into place. Bringing the stock of the weapon to her shoulder, she nodded silently to Kitarin to let her know that she would cover her.

Kitarin nodded back and advanced, holding the reins of her cliffjumper in one hand and her staff in the other. She approached to the very edge of the bridge and paused, listening to the loud roar of the water. Something wasn't right, and she couldn't place what it was. Her instincts were screaming at her to find another crossing.

Instead, she patted her cliffjumper's snout softly to let it know to wait for her before she stepped lightly onto the bridge. Her staff was

clutched in both hands so tightly that her knuckles were white. Elysandria coaxed her mount a few steps forward to close the distance and give her a better shot at anything that might threaten the Warden.

The trees began to wave ominously in the wind as Kitarin reached the middle of the bridge. She moved to the side and stared over the edge at the river as it rushed away from her, and then her eyes moved down the side of the bridge itself to stare into the deep depths. There was a chill in the air. The trees on both banks of the river began to wave violently as a strong gust seemed to hit them.

Kitarin lifted a hand to tuck the long strands of her red hair into the back of her cloak to protect it from flying up and blinding her. She noticed, however, that her hair was lying flat against her back and that, despite the rattling and shifting of the trees, there was no wind that disturbed them. She snapped her eyes upward to the treetops. Elysandria quickly did the same.

An inharmonious din of ravenous squealing rent the air. She gasped in horror at the long, snake-like creatures of shadow that lay waiting in the trees, slithering along the wood and tensing at the ends of the swaying branches as if to strike like snakes.

Kitarin shouted, "Elys!" and then they were upon her. She swung her staff in an arc as dozens of creatures pounced from the trees. She felt the wood connect, felt the resistance of the strike, and then lost her grip on the weapon as it shattered in her hand like a brittle twig.

Elysandria dove from her saddle as the creatures descended upon her as well. Her cliffjumper became covered in a mass of writhing shadow and squealed with terror as it was drug to the ground. She charged towards the bridge and had to leap to the side when another pack of the creatures descended from the trees to attack Kitarin's mount in the same manner.

Kitarin was waving the small bit of staff that remained in her hand wildly and trying to run for the end of the bridge where she knew Elys and the cliffjumpers were. Pain tore through her as many dark teeth began to rend at her flesh, and it felt as though pieces of her were being torn away with every painful bite. She hit something solid with her thighs and toppled forward, felt a moment of vertigo, and then felt a shock of cold as water surrounded her.

Elysandria gasped when she saw Kitarin fall from the bridge and into the Peregrinate. She clutched the zephyr tightly in her hands as she slid to a stop in the grass and changed direction, running along the bank downriver after the Warden. Kitarin twisted in the water as her heavy armor pulled her down. She kicked with her feet, breaching the surface for just long enough to catch a brief glimpse of Elys and swallow a lungful of air before the current and her weight drug her under again.

Gasping with the effort, Elysandria sprinted towards the boathouse. She caught the edge of the open door with her hand and swung into the interior, narrowly avoiding the sharp edge of a canoe that was resting upon a raised platform just inside. She ducked under it and ran for the far door which exited out onto the dock.

Kitarin's arm was wrapped around one of the posts that held the dock above the surface of the river. Her complexion was pale, her eyes closed, and her face only barely above water. Elysandria knelt to grab her and heard the horrific squealing of their attackers growing dangerously near. She glanced to her left and saw dozens of the writhing beasts exiting the boathouse and onto the dock only a few feet away from her.

Falling to her haunches, she brought her weapon around and fired into the great mass of shadowy creatures, which seemed to evaporate into smaller droplets of shadow that burst in every direction. Many landed into the river around her with a series of staccato splashes while others were thrown back into the boathouse. The attack bought Elysandria only a little time.

She tossed the zephyr into a canoe that was tied to the dock behind her. Bending down, she grabbed Kitarin around the shoulders and pulled. The woman was immensely heavy in her banded armor, but Elys drew upon every reserve of strength within her to lift her up onto the dock and drag her backwards across it.

Growling with the effort, Elys pulled a final time and fell backward off the end of the dock and into the canoe with Kitarin's heavy, armored bulk falling in atop her. She cried out in pain and grabbed the sides of the craft as it wobbled dangerously back and forth, fearing it would capsize and doom the both of them. Once it felt stable enough, Elys squirmed from beneath the unmoving Warden and lifted her head to see the swarm again closing in, writhing along the

dock and squealing hungrily.

She dove for the cleat hitch that bound the boat in place. Unraveling it, she twisted her body and kicked the dock, causing the canoe to launch out into the middle of the river. They caught the strong current and were rapidly borne away from the boathouse. With a sigh of relief, Elysandria allowed her body to relax.

The moment was fleeting, however. From the waving trees surrounding the river came many more of the creatures. They leapt from the ends of long oak branches, spreading their unnatural bodies wide and seeming to catch the air as they soared ever nearer. Despite the fast current, Elysandria could see that the beasts would be upon them in moments.

She stood up in the canoe and quickly undid the brooch on her cloak, allowing it to fall and pool at her feet. The soft fabric fell in a heap upon Kitarin, who opened her eyes and blinked upwards at her companion.

The rending pain that Kitarin was suffering after her attack at the bridge both blurred her vision and dulled her senses. She saw Elysandria for only a moment before the woman dove away and there was a splash. With a gasp, Kitarin sat up in the canoe and saw that they were in the middle of the Peregrinate River, with many of the shadow beasts gliding after them.

A lurch rocked the vessel, and the canoe suddenly picked up speed as if it had been caught in a rapid current. It seemed to Kitarin as though she were traveling many times faster than the flow of the river should allow. Her pursuers were unable to match the pace and fell silently into the water behind her and were gone.

Kitarin noticed the pretty white blouse that Elysandria had been wearing floating after her in the river. As she contemplated the sight, the rending pain threatened to overwhelm her and, feeling light-headed, she allowed herself to fall backward into slumber.

“What about your music, Kit?”

Kitarin looked over at her brother. Kesrin's eyes showed genuine concern for her. He was always so honest with his expressions, and it made her smile. She stopped strumming her theorbo and set it gently upon her lap, placing her hands over the strings to quiet the instrument.

“I don't think the Wardens have any laws against music,” she responded.

Kesrin gave her a wry smile and crossed his arms across his chest. The look made Kitarin laugh.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

Kitarin did, and she nodded. When she did so her fiery red hair slipped out from behind her ears to frame her cheeks. It was beginning to get long. Her intention was to grow it out just like her father had always described her mother had worn it.

“Kes,” Kitarin said gently, “I love playing music with you. I will be around for many seasons to continue to play with you. But I want to pursue this. I want to help people just like our mother did.”

Kesrin stood up with a resolute look on his face, his flute clutched so tightly in his white-knuckled hand that Kitarin truly believed it would snap in two. He tapped his fist to his chest, just as they had both always seen the Wardens do when they saluted.

“Then I am going with you,” her brother declared.

“No you're not!”

Kitarin's eyes flew open as she shouted up at the night sky. For a moment she panicked and didn't remember where she was. She felt



the gentle rocking of the canoe and heard the soft sound of water brushing along its hull, and her memories slowly started coming back to her.

When she remembered the attack at the bridge she sat bolt upright and immediately grabbed her head in pain. Fighting through the discomfort, she forced her eyes to open again so that she could look around her. She was in the middle of a calm, clear lake under a starry night sky. It was completely silent save the lapping of the water around her.

“Elys?” she said quietly. She looked around the canoe and saw Elysandria’s cloak lying upon her lap. A zephyr rested beside her, rocking gently with the canoe. Her friend was nowhere to be seen.

“Elys!”

Her shouts echoed back to her from every direction, bouncing across the water and amplified harshly. Under the vast expanse of the glowing Pike and twinkling stars above her, and in the midst of the great body of water, she began to feel horribly alone.

She checked for paddles but found that there were none. They were likely back at the boathouse, she thought. The chill in the air made her shiver and she lifted Elysandria’s cloak from her lap, wrapping the warm cloth around her tightly. Her back hurt from a long day’s slumber in her firm, metal-banded armor, but she dared not take it off yet. It was keeping her warm and besides, she felt safer wearing it despite the danger of sinking to the bottom of the lake should her canoe capsize.

Staring behind the boat, in the sparkling glow of the Pike flowing overhead, she saw the spreading waves of the wake that her vessel was kicking up. She was still caught in the same strange current that had saved her from the Roukon on the river. It was carrying her to the far side of the lake with a steady speed.

“Lake Sapphire,” she said to herself as she recognized where she was. She stared all around her for signs of the shoreline, but could only see distant shadows in the darkness. At least the stars twinkling overhead meant that the Roukon were not nearby.

Though she had heard of it of many times and often seen it from a distance, Kitarin had never visited Lake Sapphire. It was miles from her home, and her jurisdiction as a Warden generally had her patrolling in southern Denshire and far from this place. Her father had grown up on the north bank tending fields in a village called Lorin's Slough, or simply the Slough. There, he had harvested peat from an expansive bog at the lake's northeastern edge.

Though Kitarin had been born in the Slough, her father had moved her and the rest of her family farther northward when she was a very young girl after her mother had died. Her childhood was spent in the rural outlands of northern Denshire, helping her father tend to the livestock and wheat and barley fields of a modestly successful farm that her younger sisters and her father still managed today.

"We need to go north," she said softly. She had to continue on her way to warn the northern settlements of the coming swarm. She tipped the canoe alarmingly when she attempted to paddle off the sides with her hands. When her efforts did her no good, she tried to lean off the back and use her arm as a keel to alter the boat's direction. Despite her feeble attempts, the boat was on a steady course.

"We need to go north!" she shouted at the boat. It did not comply. Kitarin thought about her father and her little sisters and shivered as she felt the bite of the night's cold yet again. She wrapped herself tightly in Elysandria's cloak and sat at the back of the canoe.

Despite her long slumber earlier that evening, she felt drained. Her arms and legs were numb, and even in the warmth of the cloak she felt a horrible chill. She thought back to the attack at the bridge and at how the creature's vicious bites had felt as though they were sucking the warmth of her body from her. The cold shock of the river had been a welcome reprieve from that terrible feeling.

She awoke with a start later in the evening after having dozed off again. More memories of her brother flittered quickly away without her remembering them, but she held on to the ache in her heart that was caused by her worry for him. She smiled softly as she remembered the day they had joined the Wardens together. She had been so angry at him for coming along with her, but had soon realized that she never would have made it without him, nor he without her.

Warden Captains. Both had earned the title in three years, and Kitarin had recently been promoted to First Captain. It was an honor that their dad proudly glowed about to his friends every day. She hoped that the Roukon hadn't reached that far to the north yet. She hoped that Kesrin had made it safely there and was already evacuating their family. She hoped for a lot of things, and tried not to let herself believe that she hoped beyond hope.

Late in the night her canoe began to close on the tapered northeastern edge of Lake Sapphire. Already she could see tall willows stretching upwards with their wide-reaching branches that obscured the night sky. The canoe began to slow, and before long the marshy edges of the bog were close enough that she could leap to them from the canoe if she wanted to. But where would she go? She feared that, if she pushed herself in her injured state, she might pass out in a shallow pool and be food for one of the ravenous cold-blooded animals that called the bog home.

She sat up in her boat and watched the dark scenery as it passed by. The absence of light made every shadow look menacing. The smell of the peat became stronger, mixed with stinkweed and various odors she couldn't begin to comprehend. Ahead, as the canoe bounced off the submerged, snake-like roots of a tree, she saw a great, looming shape through the shadowy branches of the trees. What little twilight struggled through the tangle of branches overhead did a poor job of defining what it could be.

Kitarin sat forward and stared as the shape got closer. The first thing she noticed was a tall waterwheel, covered in grime with a few broken slats. Despite the current of the river flowing against it, the wheel did not move. It was attached to the side of a stone building that stood with its foundation half-submerged in the bog. Tall windows marked three distinct stories, and atop the structure rose two impressive towers which passed beyond the canopy of willow trees and jutted high up into the night sky.

Her canoe shifted and moved towards the shore of its own accord. It bumped hard against the marshy ground and shifted abruptly. For a moment, the air was still and quiet. Kitarin saw the remains of a large door that marked the entrance of the great building and was about to stand up in the canoe to disembark and make for it, when she heard a splash.

She turned her head and gasped.

Elysandria lay naked upon the shore next to her boat. As a layer of water seemed to shimmer and wash away from her, Kitarin saw that the young woman's pallor was a terrible shade of blue and her hair, black as the night was dark, clung tightly to the skin of her back. She was breathing hard, her eyes closed tightly, her hands gripping the mud and the grass as if not doing so would cause her to fall into the sky.

Kitarin leapt from the canoe and knelt to wrap Elysandria tightly in the cloak. Lifting her easily, for she was very light, Kitarin ignored the aching pain in every muscle and moved quickly for the doorway of the nearby building. Her boots struggled in the sticky, sucking mud, but she set her jaw and continued concentrating on the dark doorway ahead of her. In the back of her mind she realized that she had left the zephyr behind.

She reached the building and nudged the wasted wood of the doors aside with her shoulder. They protested with loud creaks and snaps as their ancient hinges struggled. They had obviously stood unused for many, many years.

Kitarin held Elys tightly to her as she walked inside the structure and allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Seeing rough outlines of furniture and the beginnings of hallways start to take shape before her, she hurried further inside. She hoped to find a place that she could make warm for the both of them.

High above the bog, the Empress perched upon her tower. Her eyes gleamed with curious glee as the women entered her home.

The stars twinkled in the night sky. All around were quiet whispers in the dark. Their terrible ordeal the morning before had left every refugee unable to sleep, and so they huddled close together and dared not light a fire. The only ones who managed any real rest that night were the cliffjumpers.

Basil returned quietly in the night with a retinue of six of his wardens. They had traveled back to the battleground with the misguided hope that some people may have hidden from the attack and survived, or escaped and were lost in the wilds of Denshire. Seven men had left as the sun was setting, and seven men returned now. They spirited into the camp without a word and then scattered to tend to their duties, their friends, and their families.

The threads of hope in Nijal's heart unraveled into somber sorrow as Basil approached him. He had hoped that some sign of Kamil would have been found, but the look on the commander's face told him everything. His boy was lost.

"You dropped this," Basil said. Nijal nodded his thanks as his hammer was handed over to him. The handle felt especially cold in his palms.

The two men sat quietly and stared into the darkness of the western horizon for almost an hour. Nijal felt numb to the idea that Kamil was gone. He had long ago begun to consider the young man to be like his own son, and having lost him made Nijal feel as though all of his purpose in this world had been torn away from him.

"The Roukon have moved north," Basil said quietly. "I don't think they are following us."

"We cannot afford any assumptions," Nijal said. Basil nodded his agreement. The assumption that they could hold the Peregrinate River while they gathered survivors and that the Roukon would not cross it had been a mistake that had cost many lives.

“I wouldn't blame you if you went back to find him,” Basil said.

Nijal pursed his lips. He had been thinking about doing just that, but had concluded that whatever decision he made would have to wait until Elysandria returned. He turned his eyes to Basil and found the commander staring at him with sympathy.

“Any sign of Kitarin and Elysandria?” Nijal asked.

Basil shook his head.

“Before the attack, the Captains had mentioned that they were going north to warn the outlying settlements. Their family lives there.”

Nijal nodded. Kitarin would likely go in that direction, he thought, and Elysandria may very well go with her. It could be many days before he saw the woman again, and that was if she even decided to come back. It was far more likely that she would continue north to the Awakening to warn her people. He couldn't fault her for that.

“I will stay with you, help you tend to the sick,” Nijal said. “I can help prepare and ration food, as well.”

Basil looked thankful. He patted Nijal's shoulder with a gauntleted hand and stood to move into the camp and make the rounds with his men. It was important that they saw that he was alive and well, and he would be sure to have complimentary and encouraging words for all of them. It was his job to keep the flame of hope burning in their hearts.

For now, the Wardens would continue leading the refugees east along the roots of the mountains until they reached the border of upper Valice. Once there, they would turn south and follow the veil coast to Elderbrook. Hopefully, the city was not yet under siege by these beasts and a defense could be mounted. The worst case scenario would have him and his Wardens ensuring the safety of their people by fleeing upon the veilrunners in the harbor. He had no time to consider the thought that the regent of Elderbrook may not agree to such a proposal. There was no way of even knowing whether the people there hadn't already taken every ship and fled these shores

themselves.

Everyone was eager to set off again early the following morning. The shirefolk, a peaceful people, were not those who would quickly succumb to the type of dire situation they found themselves in. So long as the sun was rising in the east, there was a destination for them. Nijal was envious of their attitudes.

He continued to man the wagon with the schoolchildren and they were happy for his company. He had a ready audience for his many stories and kept the little ones enraptured during the long, bumpy wagon rides. Their teacher, a modest older woman named Asphodel with a soft heart and infinite patience, enjoyed sitting upon the bench with Nijal as he spoke. She often contributed to his tales by giving the children context in ways that their young minds would understand.

The mountains to the south colored that horizon a bumpy, dull blue with bright, white caps. Nijal wondered as they passed by each peak whether it might truly be safe up there. The Roukon had not seemed to follow them on their own route over the pass, but they had made good progress traveling north through Valice and it was just as likely the Roukon simply hadn't made it there yet. He hoped for the glamorfolk's sake that the Roukon shunned the mountains and bypassed them entirely. Should Debo's people find themselves under attack, they would be trapped in Glimmerden with no hope of escape.

During long, silent stretches, Nijal often turned in his seat to stare west. He imagined his young lad cresting the horizon on a cliffjumper's back, waving his arms over his head to signal that he was all right. Though he had no right to wish it, he hoped that the young man had found some way to survive.

The beautiful green hills of southern Denshire languidly slipped by under tired feet, rolling wagon wheels, and sharp cliffjumper talons. They made what progress they could with the burden of so many who were so unused to rigorous travel, and halted three times a day to tend to the injured and divvy out meals. Wardens hunted game and often met back up with the wagons further along their path with savory ogren meat and freshly killed rabbit, which kept the refugees in relatively good spirits.

Nijal had no shortage of tales to tell, and so the children were kept entertained. The number of little ones in his wagon grew with every

day as more and more little boys and girls chose to ride with him and partake in his stories. He was glad for them that their minds could be focused away from the terrors they had witnessed on their long exodus from home. The shirefolk took a liking to Nijal and treated him as a patriarch of sorts, coming to him for help with mundane issues while Basil and his Wardens took care of the serious ones.

As they began to approach the horn of the mountain range, Basil left with some Wardens to charge ahead on cliffjumpers and scout the east lands that connected Denshire with upper Valice. Nijal stayed with the wagons and helped to lead them on safe roads. It was many hours before Basil and his scouts returned. The dour look on the commander's face caused Nijal to dismount and walk away from the children before they spoke.

"We climbed the east threshold and saw dire warnings," Basil said. "Upper Valice is consumed in darkness."

Nijal squinted past Basil to the southeast as though his eyes could penetrate the mountains and see such ill news for himself.

"The shadow beasts are not content with their conquest, however. Even now the storm bears north and west. We are caught between them."

"So Elderbrook is lost, then," Nijal said, with a sigh.

Basil nodded. "Though we cannot see the city, it lies within the midst of the storm. If the people have not evacuated, they have most assuredly perished there."

Basil looked at Nijal squarely and spoke in earnest, though he kept his voice low so as not to concern the shirefolk as they began to gather nearby.

"We are running out of options," Basil said. Nijal saw the endless worry and frustration in the commander's eyes. "I fear this group cannot make the trip to the north fast enough to outrun the swarms bearing down on us from both sides."

"What other choice do we have?" Nijal asked, and then knew what the answer would be before the commander spoke again.



“The mountains,” Basil said. “We have seen no evidence of the creatures passing amongst the peaks.”

Nijal was shaking his head in protest as Basil continued. “You yourself said that you had not been pursued through the pass,” the commander said. “Perhaps it is a sign that we would be safe there.”

“Winter is fast approaching,” Nijal pointed out.

Basil nodded. Their supplies were holding for now with the help of the Wardens, but food would be scarce amongst the peaks. Also, most of the refugees were not prepared for the bitter cold that they would encounter as they climbed ever higher to escape the Roukon threat.

The men and women of Denshire and their Warden protectors were all staring in Nijal and Basil's direction. The two men, though remaining civil, spoke at length with raised voices. Basil would listen patiently to Nijal and then counter with an argument that seemed to anger the Valician more and more. As the debate wore on, everyone could see Nijal's shoulders slumping further and further in inevitable defeat. Eventually, the two returned to the others, and every person there awaited their commander's word as they held their breath.

“Elderbrook is lost,” Basil announced. There were gasps and loud whispers, quickly silenced by the commander's raised palm.

“We will make for the mountains. What items you still carry with you that are not necessary for our survival, dispose of now. Should you have extra fur, blankets, and the like, please add them to the supply wagons or distribute them to those in need of them.”

Nijal hopped back up on the coach of his wagon and grabbed the reins. All of the children sat in silence, rebuked by the angry look that Nijal had upon his face. He gave Asphodel a sidelong glance before he snapped the reins and pulled gently to the right. Slowly, the wagon changed course until the imposing mountains loomed before them.

“All the fates save us if we're wrong,” he said quietly.

The golden light of the morning sun drifted into the stone building from its many west-facing windows. A heady smell from the surrounding bog was in the air, and everything seemed alive with the buzzing of the many swarming denizens that called this place their home.

Elysandria's eyes slowly opened. A moment of panic passed quickly once she realized she was safe and wrapped tightly in her cloak. She lay upon a cool stone floor, and her head rested upon something very warm. She craned her neck and looked up to find Kitarin sitting against a wall. The Warden was allowing the use of her leg as a pillow for Elys' head.

Kitarin's chest heaved with long, deep breaths that indicated she was fast asleep. She was still recuperating from her terrible ordeal during the Roukon attack on the bridge the day before. Most of her shining Warden armor was discarded to the side in a neat pile, but she continued to wear the boots and the thick suit of padding from underneath the armor for warmth.

Elysandria lifted her head gently from Kitarin's lap and unraveled the cloak, which had been tucked very tightly around her. She stood slowly. Every part of her body still ached from the long trip she had taken downriver and across the vast lake while spiriting the canoe to safety. Raising her arms high over her head, the young woman stretched broadly with her entire body, and it brought strength and relief to her joints.

Kitarin continued to sleep peacefully and was not awakened in the slightest by her movements. Elys tip toed over to the big, open doorway at the far end of the room and looked out into the bog. Sunlight was slicing through the low branches of a great community of willow trees that stood upon damp mounds of mossy soil, with many small valleys between the roots filled with brackish bog water. She took a deep breath of the peat and smiled. Though it was not her favorite smell, it reminded her that this place was still alive.

Her skin thickened to dark stone as she padded back into the shelter they had found. Barefoot as she was, she couldn't help but feel the strength of the foundations of this place and allow it to flow through her legs and up into her chest. Her footsteps became louder in the state she was in, so Elys made the decision to leave Kitarin to her slumber and explore the building. Perhaps there was some food to sate her growling stomach.

She stepped through a doorway and into a wide common room which was lit brightly by two large windows that were open to the morning air. The buzzing of flies was strong here, and the far corner of the room was submerged in stagnant water. What dominated the space, however, was a big, wooden construction built against the far wall. It had brass pipes emerging from its back in a shape like a giant metal fan. Large bellows rested beside the machine, deflated and heavily worn with age. The front was adorned with white and black keys, and an overturned bench sitting upon the damp stone in front of it indicated that a person was to sit at the construction and use it.

Elysandria walked closer to inspect it further. Through the two big windows she could see that it was attached to a huge water wheel that was built just outside the building and partially submerged in the flowing river outside. Though the current was swift, the wheel was not moving.

Elys leaned back against the frame of the window and took in the rest of the room. There were many benches all moved to the sides and stacked up as if they were being stored there for later use. The vaulted ceiling and tattered remains of rows of tapestries upon the wall were the final pieces to the puzzle, and the young woman believed that she knew precisely what this room was. It was a performance hall.

Submerged in brackish swamp water in the corner of the room to her left, and covered in a dense curtain of moss, there sat a small device. It reminded her of a contraption that she had once seen in the western frontier which had been made up of many sets of wheels, and had been used to raise and lower the heavy portcullis of a keep. It had been so difficult to turn that Hickory had to politely ask her to step aside and do it himself. She stepped over and stared at it for a while, then knelt and tried to turn it.

With a violent snap the decaying wood of the handles broke off in her hands. Chains that were tightly wrapped around the device

unraveled with a loud clattering sound as they disappeared into a partition in the wall. Outside, with a stutter and few loud creaks and groans, the huge water wheel picked up the current of the river and began to turn.

As the waterwheel rotated, the bellows beside the machine began to repetitively fill with air and deflate. After a few seconds of this, a low moan began to emerge from the pipes of the machine. It was discordant and eerie, and Elys immediately wanted it to stop.

She hurried back across the room and looked for a way to disconnect the bellows or at least keep them from deflating. Leaning upwards, her hands struck the white and black keys and the moan turned into a loud cacophony of groaning notes that shattered the stagnant bog air. She lifted her hand quickly and the sound faded away, but the inflating of the bellows and the moan from the pipes continued unabated.

“Elys, what is going on?” Kitarin's voice shouted over the din. Elysandria turned and stared dumbfounded and apologetically back at the Warden, who was stomping across the floor towards the machine.

“Turn it off!” she said.

“I can't!” Elysandria replied helplessly.

Kitarin bit her lip and stared at the contraption, then stepped around to the rear and lifted her foot high. With a loud shout, she began bludgeoning the bellows over and over with the heel of her boot. A great tearing sound and a whoosh of air followed as the sharp metal-lined heel of her boot rent the material apart. Slowly, the groan of the pipes disappeared to a whisper and then was gone entirely.

As the sound faded, the two women heard a distant squealing noise from high above them. They instinctively ducked low to the ground and stared upwards, holding their breath until the squeal eventually died away.

“What was that?” Elysandria whispered.

Kitarin shook her head. She had no idea.

Kitarin snuck over towards Elys and both women hurried to the side of the room, laying their backs against the wall and staring upwards and out the windows in silence for several agonizing minutes. Kitarin's stomach turned and she felt a shiver slip up her spine. They heard no more of the squealing from the sky, and no other sign of approaching danger revealed itself.

“Was it the shadow beasts?” Kitarin asked quietly. “The Roukon?”

“I don't think so...” Elys replied, but she sounded unsure of her answer.

The two sat together and listened to the buzzing insects of the bog and the softly creaking sounds of the waterwheel as it continued to turn in the river current just outside of the windows. Elysandria noticed after a time that Kitarin had been staring at her critically, which caused her to feel more and more uncomfortable. Before she could ask what was wrong, Kitarin spoke.

“What is wrong with your skin?”

Elys suddenly realized what she must look like. Her skin had taken on the aspect of the stone. Her heart leapt into her throat and she began to stammer.

“Sorry...”

“Don't be sorry,” Kitarin said.

Elysandria explained everything about the Pale Sisters to her friend, just as she had explained to Kamil and Nijal back in Mist Water Gully. Kitarin listened quietly as she told her of how her body adapts to the nature of the things she comes into contact with, and of the reason why her clothing had been swept away when she'd leapt into the water to guide the canoe to safety.

Kitarin smiled at the end of her story. Elysandria was relieved at her reaction and smiled back.

“I wondered how you'd managed that,” Kitarin said.

Elys laughed lightly. She stood when the Warden did and wrapped

her cloak tightly around her body. As Kitarin began to lead the way back out of the performance hall she grimaced and hugged her belly with her arms.

“Are you okay?” Elysandria asked.

“I’ve been feeling a little nauseous this morning,” Kitarin replied, and offered a smile. “It will pass.”

Kitarin stepped back into the front room, feeling the knot in her stomach ease slightly as she started to move again. She took a long breath of the musty bog air and turned to Elys, who was silently walking after her.

“We should figure out where we are. There might be something we can use to gather food around here, or at least some clothing for you to wear. This place looks as though it had been lived in at some point in time.”

“Long ago, perhaps,” Elysandria said.

Kitarin nodded as she led the way deeper into the building. Elys followed behind as quietly as she could despite the heavy footfalls of her stony feet.

The lower floor of the building had a cafeteria and sitting room, though any food that was stored here had long ago rotted or been eaten by the denizens of the bog. There were also more performance rooms further inside with benches stacked up and stages built into the far walls, though none had a machine like the one in the first room. Moldering books lined the bookcases along a hallway leading to a flight of stairs. Kitarin paused to pull a few from the shelves and look inside.

Pages fell away from warped and rotting spines and fluttered to the ground. The moisture had ruined most of the writing; however, the symbols and lines held meaning to Kitarin, who stared at them for a long moment.

Elysandria saw the Warden staring and stood behind her to watch as Kitarin slowly dragged her finger along the lines and symbols, her eyes fluttering shut.

“Kitarin,” Elys said quietly, “what are they?”

“These are musical books,” Kitarin replied. She retrieved the fallen pages and replaced them as best she could before reverently returning the books to the shelves.

The women stepped lightly up the stairs, which were thankfully made of stone like the rest of the building and had not decayed. Despite their construction, a few loose stones had broken free of their mortar and were slipping dangerously beneath Kitarin's feet as she climbed.

The second floor held numerous studies and many more books. The entire place looked as though it had been tidied up and then hastily abandoned. All of the furniture was neatly stacked in every room and all of the books were carefully put away in their cases save a few that had obviously fallen to the floor with the disruption of decay and time.

On the third floor they discovered two separate winding stairways leading up into two tall towers at either side of the building. Choosing one, they ascended carefully together. The towers were home to many dormitories that were all furnished as though they had been lived in up until the very day this place was abandoned, and then all of the belongings had been left behind. If everything hadn't looked so obviously aged and moldered, Kitarin would have sworn that the people who had been here were simply on an errand and would be home shortly.

They chose a dormitory to enter about a quarter of the way up the tower and looked around for clues. Elysandria found a book that was tightly wrapped and placed under what remained of the mattress of the bed. The pages were in good shape, and the beautifully penned writing inside had elegant curves.

“It's a journal,” Elys said as she scanned through the pages.

Kitarin sat on the bed, which creaked angrily at her, and put her feet up on a trunk that sat nearby.

“What does it say?” the Warden asked.

Elysandria looked through many more pages before she replied.

“I think it was written by a woman. She talks about life at an Academy. Lessons and music...”

Kitarin hopped up and knelt at the trunk. A lock held it fast, but she made short work of it with her boot heel. Opening the container, she found stacks of clothing folded atop a beautiful dress. She began to pull the clothing out piece by piece and set it on the bed.

“Definitely a woman,” Kitarin remarked as she found beautiful blouses and other pretty things. Elysandria smiled as she picked through the clothing on the bed to find an outfit.

“Sorry, but I don't think there are any shoes...”

The Warden had pulled out the beautiful dress and then frozen in mid-sentence. Beneath all of the clothing and resting at the bottom of the trunk was a beautiful, heart-shaped lyre. She bent and gently lifted the instrument from the trunk to find it in perfect shape, all seven strings tightly strung, and the pick still connected by means of a small ribbon.

After Elys had chosen a comfortable pair of dark breeches and a navy blue blouse that fit her loosely and complemented her now completely raven-black hair, she smiled brightly over at Kitarin. The Warden smiled back and nodded her approval of the new outfit. They carefully placed everything neatly back to where it had been except for the lyre, which Kitarin carried along with her as they ascended further up the stairs.

Halfway up the tower they found a door that stood ajar, allowing the cool breeze of the bog into the confines of the stairwell. Kitarin reached out and pressed it open, and the women discovered that it led outside to a causeway that stretched high above the bog to another door in the opposite tower. They could tell from where they stood that the second tower was slightly taller than the one they had been exploring.

Kitarin led the way as the two women stepped outside and caught the wind, feeling instantly enriched by the cool breeze. They walked



together to the middle and leaned upon the carved stone railing that stretched along both sides of the causeway, taking a moment to enjoy the beautiful view over the tops of the willow tree canopy. Lake Sapphire glittered just over the trees to the southwest as it reflected the bright blue sky, making its name seem all the more appropriate.

Both women were staring so intently out over the bog that they hadn't noticed the dark shape that had slipped free from the top of the tallest tower until it was upon them.

Kitarin's stomach heaved painfully. She grimaced and wrapped her arms around her body, then looked up and gasped in surprise. The Warden stepped protectively in front of Elysandria as she stared upwards and shuddered. Both women swallowed a scream of fright at the sight of the monstrous green serpent that hovered above them in the morning sky. The tip of its long, barbed tail sliced back and forth through the air like a whip and looked as though it could reach all the way down to the roof of the main building below them. Its wings easily stretched from one tower to the other.

The stone of the causeway cracked as the serpent perched upon it on two powerful hind legs. Craning a long neck, the horrific creature lowered its head until it was eye level with the two women. Kitarin reached back for Elys and prepared to run for the door, but then the serpent spoke in a deep, feminine voice.

“Welcome,” it said, the voice a mixture of resonant bass and shrill hissing. “Are you enjoying your stay at my academy?”

Elysandria swallowed and glanced over at the doorway. It suddenly seemed to be very far away. The serpent grinned.

“Oh, please do not try to run,” it said, and began beating its wings so fiercely that great gusts caused the women to reach out and grasp the railings tightly.

“It would be a shame to lose your footing this high up.”

Kitarin clenched her fists. The pain in her stomach grew to the point where she felt she may double over, but she summoned all of the courage and authority of her status as a Warden First Captain to address their threat.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

The creature shook and hissed as it laughed derisively down at Kitarin, then stretched its head forward until its snout was mere inches from her nose

“Oh my dear shireling,” the serpent said with a sneer, “I have everything I want right here.”

As his cliffjumper grazed lazily upon wild wheat grass nearby, Kesrin cracked a butternut and carefully drained the sweet juice from within into a small bowl from his rucksack before handing it to Kamil.

The young man nodded gratefully to the Warden and drank. The liquid was viscous as it slid down his throat, reminding him of the cream he helped to harvest for wayfarers at his and Nijal's inn. He pushed the memory from his mind quickly. Thinking of the inn was like thinking of another life that had been lived by someone else.

They had pressed north through the wilds of Denshire for three days. Kamil remembered little of the first two, and the memory he did retain was not a happy one. After Kesrin had felt they'd put enough distance between them and their Roukon pursuers, he had dismounted, set the bone in Kamil's wrist with a horrifying snap, and set it with a natural splint of hard wood.

For the rest of that day and the next, Kamil had been unconscious and literally strapped to the cliffjumper while Kesrin led the animal by the reins on foot. The Warden remained optimistic despite the fact that he wished to get to his family's property as soon as possible, and didn't let on at all that having to care for Kamil was setting him back quite a bit. After all, if it hadn't been for the bravery of the young man, Kesrin would have resigned himself to death on that hill.

Kamil often thought back to the horrible morning of the Roukon attack. After having literally had a wagon collapse upon him in the chaos, the Wardens had quickly lifted him into another wagon that they were clearing to help with the escape. There were sounds of chaos all around him as Wardens shouted and their zephyrs burst the air. Despite their assurances that he would be fine, he had gradually heard the sounds of living voices fade away into the distance and be replaced by the angry groaning sounds of the Roukon as they surrounded and attacked his wagon. When he had heard Kesrin's voice and his zephyr going off above him, he ignored his pain and lifted himself from the wreckage to assist.

Once Kamil had recuperated a bit, he was able to sit up in the saddle behind Kesrin so that the Warden could again ride the cliffjumper rather than lead it. The two had made good progress after that, and Kamil complained little despite the pain he felt in his body, especially his wrist. There was a dull ache in his head that was accentuated by every bouncing step of the animal that carried them, but he clenched his teeth and ignored it. His biggest lament, besides losing Tol's knife, was having left his friends behind.

Kesrin's determination was all Kamil had needed to see to decide that he would not ask to be brought back to the refugees. He wasn't about to let this man who had now twice saved his life go off into Roukon infested lands by himself, even if the best Kamil could offer him was his companionship. The two, though speaking little, had formed a bond of mutual respect on their quiet days and nights bounding through the beautiful wilds of Denshire.

Resting upon the rise with his bowl of butternut juice, Kamil stared far to the southeast at a beautiful blue lake that reflected the sun upon its glittering surface. He was happy to have gotten the chance to see this land before the dark storms of the Roukon scarred it forever.

"We should reach my father's homestead by this evening," Kesrin said.

Kamil nodded.

"Do you see it?" Kesrin asked, pointing into the misty horizon to the north. "Do you see the Awakening?"

Kamil turned and squinted north. He saw tall green trees in the distance that blanketed the land at the roots of the mountains. He had never seen a forest of evergreens that looked so expansive or so dense.

"Perhaps she is there," Kamil said of Elysandria.

"I hope so," said Kesrin, but it was not for Kamil's sake. He hoped that the Pale Sister had reached her home and was pleading the case for aid to the people of Denshire. If the Sisters could not provide a bulwark against this tide, then Kesrin feared that nobody could.

Kamil finished his butternut juice and returned the bowl to Kesrin, then groaned as he stood with the Warden's aid. He waved his hand dismissively when asked if he was well enough to continue, stepping over to the cliffjumper and grabbing the animal's strong neck as he lifted himself back into the saddle. Kesrin joined him and they were off again, bounding down a steep decline towards the northernmost edge of Denshire Valley.

After a few more hours of travel they reached Kesrin's family homestead, and he slowed the cliffjumper as they approached. The land was eerily quiet. The sun was low in the sky and cast their long shadows over empty fields. The only movement was a distant, elevated windmill that spun languidly in the cool evening breeze.

They passed a poorly made scarecrow that was so short it resembled a shire child. Hay burst from many places where the bindings were poorly tied. The head, which was made up of a sack with buttons for eyes, lolled to the side lifelessly atop its broad shoulders.

Kesrin smiled as he passed it. He knew one of his younger sisters had likely made it with their father's cheery guidance. He remembered making similar constructs as a child alongside his twin sister, and always his father was there with tips and words of praise at their accomplishments. His creations had probably been as pathetic a deterrent to the crows as this one obviously was, but his father would never have let on that it were true.

Approaching the modest house, both men could see that the door was wide open. Kesrin dismounted and took the reins of his cliffjumper while Kamil stayed in the saddle and drew forth his dragon. He loaded it swiftly and pulled back the hammer with a loud click. As they moved forward slowly and quietly together, Kamil desperately wished that he still had his knife. He would have only one shot. Reloading was a time-consuming process.

As it turned out, their caution was unnecessary. A quick search of the house revealed it to be empty. Belongings such as blankets and clothing were gone from all the rooms, and the bread basket was conspicuously empty. Outside, at the far side of the barn, Kesrin found that their mule and cart were also gone.

"Maybe Kitarin made it here and warned them," Kamil offered as

a means of explanation.

Kesrin nodded hopefully while he walked back inside the house and then down the hall to the bedroom he had once shared with his sister. He opened the door and found it to still be as it had always been. Their father kept it this way in order to make them feel at home when they would come to visit. His eyes landed quickly upon his flute, sitting on the bed atop a parchment with a single word scrawled hastily in his father's handwriting.

He walked back out to the common room and met Kamil's eyes. The young man gave the Warden an optimistic smile that Kesrin did not return. He slipped his flute into a loop in his belt and handed the parchment to Kamil, who read the word aloud.

"Hollenguard," Kamil said.

"Yes," came a soft, melodious voice. "All roads lead to Hollenguard."

Both men were startled to see a woman standing in the open doorway. She looked upon them with dark eyes amidst a pale complexion, with long, black hair framing a beautiful face as it fell well past her shoulders.

Kesrin knelt and lowered his head with respect. Kamil just stared dumbfounded at the woman, who reminded him so much of Elysandria he had to blink several times to convince himself that she was actually someone else entirely. There were only subtle differences in the structure of her cheekbones and her chin, and the fact that she was just slightly taller than his friend. Also, while Elysandria favored practical clothing such as cotton blouses and leather leggings, this woman wore a beautiful, white silk dress inlaid with natural patterns that reminded him of a river's current.

"Your family left four days ago," she said, "sent away with the blessings of my people."

"Thank you, Sister," Kesrin said.

Only when the woman nodded and lifted her arm did the Warden stand.

“You have been warning the folk of the north?”

The D'wammish woman nodded again and stepped away from the doorway. Both men quickly followed after her. She stood at the edge of the fields, staring out into the south and saying nothing until Kesrin awkwardly broke the silence.

“Thank you for your kindness, Sister.”

She turned her head and looked over her shoulder at the Warden, but still said nothing. The graceful curve of her neck that caught in the glowing light of the setting sun was enchanting.

Kamil wanted to ask her about Elysandria. He began to step closer, but had to stop when he felt his stomach twist into knots. He winced and pressed his hand against himself, stepping back quickly and feeling the pain subside.

The D'wammish woman turned and stared at Kamil so intently that he felt as though her critical gaze might bore right through him and strike him dead. Her dark eyes, fiercely penetrating, suddenly turned to sympathetic pity and she parted her lips to speak again.

“You are injured in body and in soul,” she said to him. “You will die soon.”

Kamil was shocked and fell backward onto his haunches. Kesrin stepped over to him and knelt to ensure he was safe, then turned a curious eye towards the Sister.

“He has a broken wrist and is recovering from a concussion and some cuts,” Kesrin said. “But I have seen to his wounds and they are not life-threatening.”

She shook her head and stepped towards them. As she approached, Kamil felt his stomach begin to violently twist again. The pain became so severe that he screamed and collapsed onto his back, and Kesrin reached down to support him in his arms. Kamil's vision blurred and tears fell in streams down his cheeks.

“Stop!” Kesrin said to the Sister, but she continued forward until

she was standing over them both, staring down at the man as he writhed in Kesrin's arms.

Kamil felt as though every nerve were ablaze. He struggled to open his eyes, and then stared up at the shimmering image of the beautiful woman above him. The young man relaxed suddenly, though his body still shivered. A look of confused hope slid across his face as he strained to see her clearly.

"Elysandria?" he whispered, and then slumped in Kesrin's arms.

The woman gasped and shot a look at Kesrin, who was shouting Kamil's name and putting a worried hand to his burning forehead. She stepped backward and bit her lip, then lifted her chin regally and pointed at the Warden.

"Bring him," she said, and turned to the north.

Kesrin felt Kamil's body stop shivering as the woman stepped away. He was relieved to find that the young man still lived, though his breathing seemed much more labored than before. He lifted him in his arms and set him upon his cliffjumper and then, with a glower at her back as she walked away, hurried to catch up with and follow the Pale Sister as she led the way to the north and away from his family's farm.



Kamil slipped in and out of consciousness as they trekked northward into the night. When he was awake, he was hardly lucid, often speaking Nijal and Elysandria's name or mumbling incoherently about drink orders. Kesrin stared the entire time at the back of the Pale Sister who was leading them. He had given up long ago asking her where she was taking them or what she had done to Kamil. The woman offered no reply and simply walked north at a steady pace. The Warden never even saw her look back to make sure that he was keeping up.

Kesrin's people had a long and complicated history with the Pale Sisters. In every story of the prosperity of Denshire, the Sisters played a prominent role in the continued beauty and bounty of their land. The Sisters were they that calmed the waters, grew the plants, and tamed the beasts. At the border to the northlands, the Sisters ensured that none would cross into the valley who meant evil against the shirefolk. All life, it was said, began within the Awakening. All life, it was said, is owed to the wisdom and power of the D'wammish.

A Sister presided over his and Kitarin's ordination as Wardens. It was not until the blessings of the Awakening were conferred upon you that you were gifted with a zephyr and charged with the protection of the bounds of Denshire.

And for all their blessings and promises of prosperity, for all their visible influence in the major settlements and in the Warding Halls, the Sisters were above question. This fact always bothered Kesrin. Even the Warden Commanders were unwilling to ask questions of the Pale Sisters. To do so was to receive nothing but a long stare, as though one were receiving a silent rebuke. Kesrin had often debated this topic with Kitarin, who mostly waved away his concerns. Kitarin was happy to take every individual for what they were. She did not question the idyllic life of the valley or the role the Sisters truly played.

Kesrin did not wish to ask the questions out of any sort of mistrust of the Sisters or their history together with his people. He simply

wished to know about them. All his life, he afforded no respect for those who did not tell him the truth. Since the very first question he could remember asking his father, he honored those who answered those questions with faith in his ability to understand and comprehend them. He owed the Sisters his respect as a Warden, but he did not have to enjoy their company or their secretive ways.

Were it not for the Sister's announcement that Kamil would die, Kesrin would have preferred to just turn his cliffjumper east and follow after his family. But he did not wish death upon the young man and was moved by the pain he seemed to be in. He was a Warden, and life within the bounds of Denshire was his responsibility to protect.

He followed her ever onward throughout the night. The Sister never stopped to allow him to rest, to eat or drink, or to tend to Kamil. She simply kept walking, and often he found himself trotting after her to catch up when the terrain didn't allow for comfortable travel and he had to find a route around it with his cliffjumper and its heavy burden.

When they had traveled for so long that Kesrin felt the sun should surely rise soon, they finally reached the edges of the Awakening. The Pale River rumbled by, churning with a white, milky froth. Beyond the river loomed the enormous trunks of thickly packed evergreens that marked the border of the forest.

The woman did not pause. She lightly stepped into the water and Kesrin was amazed to see that it only went as deep as her ankles. She was twenty yards away, nearly halfway across, when she noticed that the Warden was not following.

"Come on," she encouraged with a wave of her arm.

"To cross the Pale River is to invite death," Kesrin said. He was quoting a common warning often spoken among the people of northern Denshire.

"I assure you," the woman said, smiling for the first time since he had met her, "you will not die."

He nodded and removed his plated boots before leading his cliffjumper forward. The water was surprisingly warm on his feet, and

for the entire time that they were submerged he felt nothing of the aching blisters that had developed on his soles from the hard travel of the night. The Warden wished that he could take off his armor and sit in the river. His hindquarters still ached from the day's hard riding and could use soothing more than anything.

The woman led the way into the forest, which plunged them into near darkness. He had to call out to her when he was forced to slow his steps and she had continued walking far beyond his ability to see in the gloom. Her beautiful, soft voice fluttered back to him as if she stood just inches away.

"I cannot approach for fear of injuring him further. Please, there is nothing to fear in this forest. The path is quite comfortable to walk."

"But I cannot see it," Kesrin called.

There was a long pause. Kesrin realized as he stood in the darkness that the forest sounded unlike any other forest he had traveled before. In fact, it didn't sound like anything at all. There were no calls of animals, fluttering wings, or even the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. The only sound was the dull roar of the river behind them and the nervous sounds of his cliffjumper as it waited to be led again.

"Follow the sound of my voice," the woman finally responded.

Kesrin thought the idea loony, but after a few seconds he heard a beautiful lyric emerge from the darkness ahead of him. It was as if a beacon were suddenly shining in the dark. The words felt ancient, and even though he understood none of it, it spoke to his mind like a river of calming thoughts. He was drawn to the sound.

He followed, careful to keep his footsteps quiet. He did not want to hear any sound but that of the Sister's song. Her voice led him through the forest safely, and not once did he find himself tripping over foliage or striking the errant low branches of a tree. As the sun rose, it cut dimly through a web of high branches and pine needles to cast the forest in a beautiful light. Kesrin once again saw her just ahead of him as she continued to sing her song to guide him. The Warden said nothing of the fact that he could see her for fear that her song would end.

When the Sister's song finally did end, it was replaced with the sound of roaring water growing ever closer. Kesrin emerged into a meadow where the milky-white Pale River flowed over a low cliff and into a deep pool. The Sister had removed her dress and was standing at the center of the pool, the frothing water flowing around her chest.

"Bring him to me," she called over the sound of the falls behind her.

Kesrin stripped off his heavy armor and lifted Kamil from his cliffjumper's saddle, then carried him into the pool. He was careful to keep the young man's head above the surface of the water. The current was strong, but Kesrin held fast against its pull as he approached the Sister. He kept his eyes locked to hers, not wishing to shame her by glancing downward at the graceful curves of her body. He noticed as he waded towards the center of the pool that all around him in the depths were spots of light that twinkled like the stars in the night sky.

"Give him to me," the Sister said.

Kesrin was reluctant as he passed Kamil carefully into her arms. He feared that the strong current of the river would carry him away, but the Sister held him tightly as she kept only his head above the water.

She stared at the injured young man for a long moment before her dark eyes lifted up to the Warden's.

"What is his name?" the Sister asked.

"Kamil."

She looked back at Kamil and pulled all of the wet, errant strands from his face. Kesrin was reminded of a woman lovingly doting on her child, and couldn't help but smile at the sight. He realized that Kamil was not reacting to her as he had before. His body was at peace, his expression soft as though he were only in a deep slumber.

"Kamil," the Sister said, "the Pale River embraces you."

Right before his eyes, Kesrin witnessed the woman disappear as if

the waters of the river had reached up and consumed her. Kamil slipped quickly beneath the water and Kesrin panicked, reaching out to protect him. It felt to the Warden as if a fast-flowing current were enveloping the young man, and it was so strong that it prevented Kesrin from getting a grip on him. He was relieved to see, however, that it did not carry him away.

The man lay beneath the water long enough that Kesrin began to believe he must surely be drowning. The Warden called out to the Sister to no avail, and try as he might, he could not penetrate the current that seemed to surround the young man in order to rescue him.

Kamil suddenly burst from the water gasping for air. Kesrin reached out and grabbed him, holding fast to him through a surge of panicked thrashing until the realization came that he was safe. Kamil saw Kesrin's bright green eyes and calmed down, clutching at the Warden's arms as he looked around him in a daze.

"Where are we?" he asked, spitting out water as it splashed up into his mouth.

Kesrin led the man out of the river. When Kamil arrived he immediately collapsed on the bank, rolled over onto his back, and stared up at the morning sky that was visible through the thick branches high above him. Kesrin sat beside him and began to don his armor again. He had only just pulled one plated boot over a foot when the waters in the bank stirred and the sister reappeared.

As she stepped out, the water slithered from her body, starting from her head and ending at her toes. Where once it seemed the image of a woman that was carved of river water stood, there emerged the gentle, naked curves of the Pale Sister. She retrieved her dress and slipped it over her head, pulled her wet, black hair out of the garment and set it against her back, and then approached Kamil, who had been staring with no amount of careful discretion.

She knelt before him and Kamil felt no pain. His stomach did not twist into a knot and his vision did not blur. She looked into his eyes and he looked back into hers and he saw Elysandria there. He smiled, and she returned it.

"Hello, Kamil," she said. "My name is Illysidyl. Welcome to the

Awakening.”

Kamil looked around him at the giant evergreens that surrounded the bank of the pond. The water, though milky, seemed to shimmer like the night sky. Kesrin’s cliffjumper was grazing peacefully at the edge of the pond and partaking of the water. The Sister didn’t seem to mind.

“What did you do to me?” he asked as he stared at the twinkling lights in the water.

“The river drove the darkness from your body.”

He looked at her again, and she saw confusion in his eyes. She stroked a hand back through his wet hair as she answered. The gesture was so maternal that Kamil, having only the vaguest memories of his own mother from when he was a very young boy, felt his heartbeat calm in his chest.

“The large host of creatures that attack Denshire...” she began.

“The Roukon,” Kamil prompted her. Illysidyl’s dark eyes widened for a brief moment at his speaking of the D’wammish word. She realized with a small degree of comfort that he must have heard it from Elysandria’s lips at some point. She smiled again at him and continued.

“Yes, the Roukon,” she said. “These creatures are the very antithesis of the living. They are drawn to and consume life in all its many forms. Once their claws are in you, your life will begin to burn away as if by a poison. Eventually, it will consume you.”

Kesrin was sitting nearby and was horrified by the Sister’s words. He imagined the scores of his kin who had been touched by the Roukon before the Wardens had evacuated them from the hilltop. Many were likely carrying the poison of their touch.

“It is how they reproduce,” Illysidyl continued. “Their claws and their fangs will leave no physical wounds, but will instead drive the life from living things, and then the living rise again as Roukon. Their hunger to quench life expands with their growing swarm until there is nothing left upon which they may feed.”

“So,” Kamil stammered, “I would have become...”

“No, not you,” she interrupted. “You were touched, yes, but your life was not consumed by them. If one is touched but escapes death, the poison of the Roukon will still eventually take them. With no Roukon present to feed upon the fleeting life, the victim of the poison will simply perish.”

“How long does one have, once touched?” Kesrin asked.

Illysidyl turned her head to look at the Warden. He saw sympathy there, as if she knew of the refugees that he had seen attacked at the hill.

“Not long,” she said. “Three, perhaps four days. They will fall ill as if a fever were boiling inside them, and soon afterward they will begin lose their will to live. When that happens, it is not much longer before they fall irreversibly into darkness.”

The Pale Sister turned her attention again to Kamil, who was staring up at her calmly. She felt his body exuding the warmth of the life that was re-gifted to him. She touched his arm, and he felt the coolness of the river upon his skin again.

“Our river is where my sisters and I were birthed,” Illysidyl said. “Each of the lights that twinkle beneath the waters there in the pool represents a Sister who has been born into this world. It is the half of her life that she leaves behind in order to continue the cycle for those that will come after her.

“It is why you could not bear to be near me. I, along with my sisters, am the very essence of life itself. So strongly does the flame of life burn inside of us that to look upon us blinds the Roukon. A Roukon is seared by our very touch. Had I reached out and touched my fingers to your skin in the state that you were in last night, you would have been struck dead.”

Kamil took a long breath and let it out slowly. He sat up and turned his eyes outward to the forest again. It felt to him suddenly to be a dreadfully lonely place. While the trees towered high above and the water churned and frothed as it cascaded into the pool, the lack of

distinct foliage, flowers, or fruit-bearing trees and the absence of the sounds of any life from the largest forest animal to the tiniest buzzing insect made the place feel stark and empty to him. He thought, then, that Elysandria may have had good reasons to wish to leave her home.

“She was coming to warn you,” Kamil said as he stared out at the vast expanse of trees.

His words were halted by the gentle touch of Illysidyl's fingers as she placed them lightly on his cheek and turned his head so that he would look at her again. Her eyes shimmered with a vulnerable hope that took Kesrin off-guard as he watched from nearby and waited for an opportunity to plead for assistance. The Warden had never seen a Sister display such a human expression.

“Please,” Illysidyl said earnestly, “tell me about Elysandria.”



“Kitarin,” Elys whispered quietly.

Atop the highest tower of the Academy, both women sat in the afternoon sun. Elysandria reached out to her friend, but the Warden drew away. She had grown increasingly ill over the past few nights of their captivity atop the towers of the academy and was now sitting with her knees drawn tightly under her chin, wincing and grimacing and often rocking slowly back and forth.

“Kitarin, can I get you anything?”

Elys moved closer and Kitarin moaned and fell away from her. The Warden staggered to her feet clutching her stomach and then looked at the D'wammish woman with cold, emerald eyes.

“Stay away from me,” she said.

Without another word, Kitarin stormed off the roof and through the door that led down into the tower. Elys stared at the spot where she had sat, confusion and fear coloring her thoughts. She stood and moved to the edge of the tower, staring downward at the brilliant flash of red hair as Kitarin stepped across the causeway towards the opposite tower. The Warden stopped and turned to look up at Elysandria briefly, then spun back around and continued onward with rapid steps.

Beneath the towers, writhing amongst the mud and water and submerged trunks of the bog, were the thrall of the Empress. At the behest of Elys and Kitarin's captor, the thrall had gathered and surrounded the foundations of the building. Their dark, scaly skin glittered in the sunlight, making it seem as though the academy stood amidst a maelstrom of churning black water. Deadly tails tipped with venomous barbs flashed up at her, and she saw snakelike heads craning skyward with bright eyes gleaming as each of the thrall fought for a chance at a glimpse of their Empress.

Feeling defeated, Elys dropped down to the stone and lay back against the parapets of the tower roof. Their meager food supplies hadn't lasted them more than a day, and the Empress and her thrall made sure that they were unable to leave the towers to find sustenance. Elysandria's stomach rumbled angrily and she rubbed it with her hand, desperately wishing she had some of Nijal's fruits or spicy bacon.

As if in silent answer to her thoughts, there was a violent whoosh of air and the Empress alighted upon the tower across from her. The creature opened her huge maw and dumped a thoroughly mauled fawn upon the stone. Elys wrinkled her nose at the sight before looking up at the dark serpent with derisive eyes.

"Dinner," the serpent said.

"I'm not hungry," Elysandria replied.

At this the Empress bent down, her long neck bringing her snout directly in front of the young woman's face. Elys held her breath and swallowed as she smelled the foul odor of the bog reeking from the decay and rot that had collected between the shiny, green scales.

"I think that you are," the Empress said.

Elysandria fought her fears and stood, clenching her fists as she raised her chin and stared at her captor. She must have looked a sight, she thought to herself, standing but a foot or so higher than the Empress' knees. Still, she summoned every air of dignity that was afforded to a Sister of the Pale River.

"Did you see the storms in the west while you were flying?" Elys asked.

She saw the serpent's eyes snap up to the horizon and back down again.

"You did, didn't you? They are the herald of your doom, those storms. When they reach this Academy, they will consume you."

The Empress raised a mighty, taloned foot and slammed it against the parapet beside Elysandria's head. The rending sound of splitting

stone set her ears ringing. She flinched and then looked meekly back up at the Empress as the creature sneered.

“I have lived in this bog for a century,” she hissed. “I have weathered many storms. I do not fear them.”

“This is a storm you cannot weather,” Elys said.

The Empress lifted her foot from the parapet. Broken pieces of stone rattled to the ground around them as she backed away and curled up her long, serpentine body to lay at the far edge of the tower. She nudged the dead animal with her snout.

“Eat,” she commanded.

Elysandria’s eyes drifted to the carcass of the fawn. She felt her stomach rumble again and had to close her eyes tightly and swallow hard to stave off the feelings of hunger. She shook her head firmly.

“I am not hungry,” Elysandria repeated.

The Empress sighed. With the speed of a striking snake, the serpent stretched out her neck and snapped the head of the animal completely off. The horrible crunching sounds caused Elys to wince and look away.

“I had hoped you would provide more entertainment for me than this,” the Empress said with a mouth full of fawn’s head, “but you are arrogant and your friend is far too sick to do much that will amuse me.”

Elysandria looked back at her captor with curiosity.

“You have noticed that she is not well?”

The Empress lifted her head and stared across the way at the slightly lower roof of the second tower. Elysandria stood and turned, seeing the Warden and her beautiful, bright red hair sitting upon the parapets there. Kitarin's eyes were turned to the southeast. She was thinking about her people, Elys thought to herself sadly.

“I can smell it,” the Empress said.

Elys heard her captor’s hissing breaths and turned to look up at her. The Empress was staring down at her with beady black eyes.

“You should hope you do not catch what she has,” the serpent said, “for I have seen it in many of my prey. Animals that smell as she does suffer as their disease consumes them from the inside. It is spreading like a plague. She likely has only a day or so left to live.”

Elysandria's mind raced. It must be the Roukon, she concluded quickly. At the bridge, Kitarin had been attacked by many of them. Perhaps she now carried their curse and it was burning away inside of her.

“It leaves me with a conundrum,” the Empress continued with an odd air of sadness in her voice, “I had hoped that once you began to bore me I could kill one of you to see how the other would react. It is so very interesting to see how you little folk care for one another.”

Elys felt a shudder of dread. She glanced over at the doorway which led back into the tower, biting her lip at how very far away it looked. The Empress smelled her fear and grinned down at her with glee in her beady eyes.

“Oh, do not worry, pretty thing. If I kill you, I will not have long to enjoy the other's pain before her sickness takes her. But I must take care to kill her in a way where I do not risk catching the disease as well.”

As Elysandria began to edge towards the exit, the Empress snaked her neck around to cut her off. The creature stared fiercely into Elys' eyes as she tilted her monstrous head to the side.

“I don't suppose you’d care to do it for me?”

Elys could only stare back. She drove her nails into her palms to keep her body from shivering in the serpent’s presence. The Empress snorted, spouting a wave of rancid air that blew the D'wammish woman's hair back over her shoulders. Her sharp talons tapped on the hard stone as she mulled things over.

“Perhaps I could just swat her off of the tower,” she mused, her long tail whipping back and forth. “It would give my thrall something to play with.”

Elysandria screamed with rage and swung her fist. The Empress was taken by surprise and couldn't dodge the blow, which connected with a dull thump against her jaw. Because of the tower that she stood upon with her bare feet, Elys' fist was as hard and thick as stone. There was force enough behind her attack to cause the serpent to rear back in surprise.

Elys saw her chance and ran for the exit. There was a whoosh of air that lifted her off her feet and, as she fell, she was caught and pressed against the stone floor by the Empress' heavy foot. She tried in vain to fight against her captor but as she fought, the serpent only pressed harder upon her chest. She feared that if she continued to struggle the next sound she would hear would be the shattering of her ribs.

The sky was blotted out by the great head of the Empress, who flicked her wicked tongue between her teeth as she brought her snout down low. Saliva fell upon Elys' face in steady, sticky clumps.

“I think you may just be more trouble than you are worth,” the Empress said.

Elysandria would have responded, but she could not take a breath with the weight of the creature's foot upon her chest. She saw stars alighting in her vision as she fought to keep her consciousness, and her mind raced back through desperate memories. She thought of the beauty of the night sky and the rings of the Pike that slowly slid by above their world like a gold and silver river. Her mind turned to Kamil and how she desperately wished she could have said goodbye to him, or at the very least known that he was safe. She heard distant music then, and it calmed her despite the pain that pressed down upon her.

The Empress heard it too and lifted her foot. Her head snaked around as she sniffed curiously at the air.

“What is that?” the serpent asked.

Elysandria groaned in pain as she lifted herself onto her elbows. Her vision cleared, the stars dancing to the edges of sight, and yet she still heard the music. It floated gracefully on the wind like a melancholy dance. It was beautiful.

“What is that?” the serpent repeated. She looked agitated as she bounded up onto the parapet, seemed to hone in on the source, and leapt and spread her wings. Elysandria had to fight against the lingering pain in her chest to get to her feet, stumbling to the edge of the tower.

She saw the Empress land across the way where Kitarin had been resting and she gasped, believing the monster to be following through on her threats. Strength returned to Elys’ limbs as adrenaline surged through her body and she was off. She flew down the stairs, her feet barely touching them, and was then racing across the causeway.

The strange music continued, and as its beautiful resonance grew ever closer, Elysandria felt more strength and courage bolstering her steps. Though she wished for any sort of weapon, she resolved to throw herself at the serpent if need be. At the very least she could perhaps wrest a wicked tooth free from her jaws before the Empress overpowered and consumed her. She would not let harm come to Kitarin.

She stopped short at the door which led out onto the roof. All she could do was stare, mouth agape, at the sight before her. She forgot to breathe.

Kitarin was there, still sitting upon the parapet. The wind was blowing her red hair in such a way that she looked ethereal in the bright sunlight. In her lap was the lyre she had discovered down in the dormitories, and her hands danced among the strings as her fingertips plucked them. An enriching melody, infused with love and loss, hope and despair, drifted all around the rooftop.

The Empress was there as well, coiled at the far side of the tower and staring intently at Kitarin. The serpent seemed completely enraptured by the music and listened quietly. With every beat of the rhythm her huge head lolled back and forth. The tip of her long tail swung to the left and right rhythmically as well.

Kitarin was completely focused on her instrument. She stared at it

lovingly as she played, and cradled it as a woman would carry her newborn child. The music lent the Warden an air of noble tranquility so dreamlike that it was impossible to tell how many minutes had passed before Elys had the presence of mind to do something.

Slowly, quietly, she snuck out onto the roof. She didn't seem to catch the attention of either the Empress or Kitarin as she approached. At that time, she envisioned Tol's knife in her mind. Had she had the weapon with her, she would surely have leapt upon the great serpent and slit her throat then and there.

A discordant note fouled the music, and the Empress' head snapped up. As Elys closed the distance, Kitarin started to wince and her hands faltered. The music lost its beauty as the melody began to break down.

“No!” the Empress screamed like a petulant child. “Bring it back!”

Elysandria paused in her steps, but Kitarin continued to falter. The lyre fell to the tower floor with a discordant twanging of the strings as the Warden grabbed herself around her waist and doubled over in pain. Because of her precarious perch, Elys feared that she might fall and rushed forward with an outstretched hand to save her.

“Stay back!” Kitarin screamed at her as she twisted away. The sudden reaction caused her to slip over the side of the parapet, and with a frightened scream she was gone.

Elysandria shouted her name, but was thrown to the stone floor by a whoosh of air as the Empress took off and disappeared over the side after the Warden. There was a horrible silence that followed as Elysandria slowly picked herself up, and then a loud beating of wings heralded the serpent's return. Clutched ever so gingerly in her talons was Kitarin. As she was placed upon the stone, she quickly curled up and once again wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

The Empress snaked her head menacingly towards Elys. Angry snorts of foul air blew across her face as the young D'wammish woman stared up at her captor. The intense fury behind the beady eyes of the serpent burned with unbridled fury.

“Bring it back!” the Empress commanded.

“Bring what back?”

Her long, barbed tail snaked around suddenly. With a snap like a whip, the door behind Elysandria shattered into bits.

“Bring it back!” the Empress commanded again.

Elysandria shivered as she glanced over at the lyre that lay a few feet from where Kitarin was whimpering in pain. The Empress wanted the music back.

“She is very sick,” Elys said quietly. “She cannot play.”

“Then fix her!” the Empress roared.

Elysandria's mind raced. There was one option she knew of that might save Kitarin's life if they acted quickly. She lifted her chin again and stood before the serpent, a noble Pale Sister and protector of Denshire once more.

“I cannot fix her,” she stated firmly. “Not here.”



Nijal stood before the warmth of the blazing fire with Basil at his side. Both stared at the high flames with stern eyes, quietly wrestling internally about the decisions that had brought them to this moment.

It had been Basil's idea to have the pyre. Seventeen men and women now burned upon it, and the flames lit the high cliff the pyre was built upon with an unhappy glow. Below, in the camp, the refugees were at a near panic after so many of their number had fallen so dreadfully ill. All had died within hours of each other. All had been injured in some way in the Roukon attack which had separated Nijal from Kamil and Elysandria. Basil hoped that the pyre would put to rest some of the concerns that the disease might spread.

Already, those others who were injured in the battle but had not grown ill were being treated like pariahs and sent to tents far away from the others. The Wardens did their best to keep order, but the despair of the situation had already descended upon all of them like an oppressive fog.

Over the past few days the refugees had watched from the mountains as the valley below became consumed with the storms that marked the Roukon's passing. The nights had been tense, with many fearing every shadow as a sign that the enemy was advancing up the mountain to take them. But after a few nights of peace, even Nijal began to imagine that Basil had made the right decision and that they were all safe.

And then, one by one, people had started dying.

The entire day was a nightmare. It was as though an unseen enemy were marauding through their camp wielding the silent touch of death. Nijal knew better. All those who had died had been victims of the Roukon when the hill had been attacked. Something in the Roukon's touch had eventually led to their deaths. He kept the children close and ensured that they did not become separated in the panic. Luckily, none of them were stricken.

As quickly as the deaths had begun, they had ceased. No others seemed to be ill, and before long the Wardens were loading a wagon with the dead and hauling them up to a pyre to be cremated. The clothing was stripped at Nijal's urging even though Basil argued against the indecency of it. In the end, the argument that warmth was needed wherever it could be found won out over any desire for the deceased to take their clothes with them into the fire.

The place where the refugees' flight had come to a stop in the mountains was chilly, but at least Basil had found them a spot with bit of refuge from the driving winds. Snow lay about but did not blanket the land completely, and a nearby lake that was shaped like a tapering hook had an abundance of fish to be caught.

Basil was staring east towards the bay and Elderbrook. Nijal stepped away from the pyre and moved to join the commander.

"I believe the other refugees will be safe," Nijal assured him.

"I know," Basil said with a nod. He had come to the same conclusion that the disease had been spread by the Roukon attack.

For a long while the two stared out over the blackness of the valley at night, imagining the boiling storms without being able to see them. The nearby fire, blazing and leaping into the air, made it difficult to see most of the stars above, though the rings of the Pike still shone with their ever-present glow.

"You know," Nijal said, breaking the silence, "the kids and I, we managed to journey into Denshire even with the storms raging above it."

Basil turned to look at Nijal as he spoke. Nijal knew it was a touchy subject with the commander, but he felt as though sitting in the mountains indefinitely was a poor long-term decision.

"I believe once the Roukon have passed through an area they do not come back in number. A few of us could go down again in a couple of days. Perhaps we could press to Elderbrook and see if any of the veilrunners still sit in port."

Basil stared out again to the east. It seemed that Nijal's words

were gaining some traction, so he continued.

“A large enough ship and this lot could easily fit upon it,” Nijal said with a wide sweeping gesture of his arm down towards the refugees. “We could set sail out of the bay and make our way east. The lands there are likely to be untouched by this, unless the Roukon somehow learn to run the veil.”

Basil nodded.

“I agree,” he said. Nijal let out a long sigh of relief as the commander continued. “After we have ensured ample provisions I will send a group out towards Elderbrook. These mountains, a sanctuary though they may appear to be, cannot promise to sustain all of us throughout the winter.”

Nijal nodded and clapped the man on the shoulder with his hand. He had a lot of respect for Basil. The Wardens were brave men and women and they had done well to collect so many of the shirefolk and keep them safe. Basil had the weight of many lives upon his shoulders and Nijal did not envy him one bit.

He turned and left the commander to his thoughts as he walked past the pyre and began descending down a path that would lead back to the refugee camp. His optimism got the better of him as he walked, and with a sad smile he imagined that Kitarin and Elysandria might catch sight of the fire and race up into the mountains to join them.

A rising din from below caused him to break into a run. The refugees were stirring like a mob. There were angry shouts and horrified screams rising up from the little glade that they were using as a temporary home.

“Direkin!” he heard them shouting.

“The direkin attack us!”

Nijal sprinted, then. As he neared the low light of the many fires of the camp he saw the refugees all crowding into one spot. He raced to that spot, pulling and shoving at people until he could get to the center. A large open ring of shirefolk had formed, and at the center of the ring a heavyset, older man was sitting upon a little creature, who

struggled vainly beneath him.

The creature's face was bloodied with freshly opened cuts over its eyes and along its cheekbones. If not for the elongated feet that struggled beneath the man, Nijal could easily have mistaken it for a shire child. But this was no child. This was one of the glamorfolk.

The heavysset man lifted his fist, and Nijal bolted forward from the crowd. With a grunt, he put his shoulder into the man's side and threw him clear. Both men fell in a heap. The glamorin, coughing pathetically, only squirmed upon the ground.

The man Nijal had tackled scurried to his feet, staring at him angrily. Nijal paid him no heed. Instead, he moved back to the little creature and knelt at its side to assess the damage.

The glamorin shied away from him and whimpered slightly. Nijal winced at the horrific wounds it had suffered at the hands of the aggressive man who had pinned it down. He looked around him and saw the refugees closing into a tight circle. For every one of them who had a soft look of pity or mercy, there were three whose expressions bordered on outrage.

“Back, all of you!” Nijal said, his voice booming. It was a deep voice, a southerner's voice. The very resonance of it caused the crowd to literally jump backward.

Wardens arrived and restored order, calmly ensuring that all of the people were properly moved back to a safe distance. Basil appeared and knelt next to Nijal, staring down at the wounded creature with him.

“Where did it come from?” Basil asked.

Before Nijal could venture a guess, the creature responded in a little voice.

“The delvings,” it said quietly.

Nijal tilted his head and looked down at the glamorin. He placed a soft palm upon its shoulder in an attempt to quiet its fear, but it did no good. The glamorin twisted away from his touch.

“Please,” it whimpered. “Please let me go.”

His heart ached at the fear and pain he saw in the little one's eyes. He looked up at Basil, whose jaw was set in grim determination. For a moment, Nijal feared Basil would ask for a staff to crush the glamorin's skull. He never got the chance, however.

Again there arose a chorus of shouting nearby. A tumult was building in the distance, with more men and women shouting about direkin. Nijal leapt to his feet along with Basil. The two exchanged a quick, worried glance.

“Attend that,” Basil said to a nearby Warden as he pointed at the glamorin.

The Warden clapped a fist to his heart, and then both Nijal and Basil were racing towards the sounds of the commotion. They heard the loud blasts of zephyrs being fired, and Basil quickly readied his staff. Nijal could hear the crowd now. The voices of the Wardens were rising over the sound of an ensuing battle.

“Direkin are invading!”

“The camp must be protected!”

“Form ranks!”

Nijal began to shout, then. His longer legs put him ahead of the commander, and as he neared he was shouting orders as if he were one of the Wardens himself.

“Stand down!” he called. “Stand down!”

He heard another voice from up ahead, rising above the chaos. The voice was higher than his, but equally as commanding.

“Stop!” the voice shouted. “Stop! Stop!”

Nijal edged a Warden out of the way with his shoulder just as the young woman was raising her zephyr to fire. She lost control of the

weapon and shot it into the ground just ahead of her with a loud rumble, causing dirt and rocks to fly upward and outward in all directions.

“Stand down!” Nijal shouted again as he reached the head of a column of Wardens who were all forming ranks with zephyrs at the ready. Across the way, a line of glamorfolk warriors, more than double that of the Wardens and all armed with long, deadly spears, were setting their stances as if to charge.

“Stop!” a glamorin shouted as it burst from the ranks of its fellows. It skidded to a halt and stared across the way at the menacing line of Wardens, all with zephyrs pointed directly at it. It puffed out its little chest, planted its spear firmly upon the ground, and stood looking every bit as noble and commanding as Basil himself.

Nijal smiled as he let out a light chuckle of disbelief. The commanding glamorin met his eyes, and he heard its little gasp of surprise.

“Hello again, my friend,” Nijal said.

Overcoming the distrust between the people of Denshire and the glamorfolk was an exhausting task. The two camps kept well away from one another, with the Wardens ensuring that none of their kinsfolk decided to take it upon themselves to harass any of their visitors. There was rage amongst the glamorfolk that could easily have boiled over into an assault when their errant companion, bruised and beaten, was returned to them. Nijal was sure that without the presence of Debo, who all the folk seemed to look to for leadership, a skirmish could have erupted which would have taken many lives.

The sun was finally rising over a quiet camp, as most of the refugees had given in to a late slumber. The glamorfolk had all but retreated from whence they came, leaving Debo to sit with Nijal and Basil to discuss things.

“Three days after you left, the dark ones came,” Debo said.

Basil exchanged a look with Nijal that was a mixture of apology and livid concern. Nijal tried to wave off the commander's worry, but he could tell that the man was lost in despair. Now that they were trapped in the mountains, they were doomed. The Roukon would not stay down in the valley as the Wardens had hoped.

“Our spears and arrows broke upon them as though they were made of the mountains,” Debo continued. “Most of our warriors fell defending the entrance of Glimmerden. The rest fought a retreating battle further and further into the deeps.”

“You were trapped?” Nijal asked.

Debo shook his head.

“No. While most wanted to fight, I chose to retrieve the remnants of my clan and flee. We chose to live.”

Debo seemed to wrestle still with the decision, his proud warrior

eyes shimmering with regret and fury and sadness. Basil set his jaw and nodded at Debo.

“You made the right decision,” the commander said respectfully. “It was a decision I was forced to make as well, at the cost of many lives left behind. Do not allow your choice to haunt you.”

Debo nodded somberly. All three sat in silence for a time, with Debo using a crooked stick to poke at the cinders of the campfire they had built. It had long ago burned down after the rising of the sun.

“How did you escape Glimmerden?” Nijal asked.

“We entered the delvings,” said Debo.

Both Basil and Nijal gave the little creature a look that begged for more explanation. Debo watched the tip of his stick catch fire, then tossed it end over end into a snow bank where it fizzled. He sat back and wrapped his cloak around himself before continuing.

“Glimmerden is but one small part of the vast world that lies beneath yours. The delvings are the highways that stretch through the stone and link our clans with the others of our folk. It is a dangerous, dark, and lonely journey. But it was the only escape that was open to us.”

“Where did you hope to flee to, using the delvings?” Basil asked.

“Our plan was to flee north. It has been centuries since our ancestors journeyed into the Mizzlemist and settled in Glimmerden, yet the story of their wars are still told amongst my people. Our chiefs met with the chiefs from many tribes. Together, they formed an alliance that would hold out against the shadow at the great fortress that stands vigilant at the end of all roads.”

“Hollenguard,” Basil said.

Nijal saw Debo and Basil exchange nods.

“All roads lead to Hollenguard,” Debo said reverently.



Nijal knew of Hollenguard, an abandoned stone castle that sat at the eastern border of Denshire. It was an old fortress city right on the edge of the veil. The road north from Elderbrook and both roads that led up out of Denshire Valley, along with many trade roads and even the Peregrinate River, all converged at Hollenguard.

Nijal had seen the fortress many times in his travels. It was carved out of the very stone of the mountains that surrounded it and looked many, many centuries old. Nobody bothered to go there. The long moat that once protected it was dried, the stone walls were cracked, and the grounds were overrun with foliage.

“You should reconsider,” Nijal said, “I have seen this place. It has been abandoned and left to ruin for centuries. Only travelers stay there now, and never for more than a night to shelter in the stone.”

Debo flashed his fierce eyes at Nijal and the man swallowed his words.

“Hollenguard will save us,” the glamorin said.

Basil stood, shaking his head. His plated boots kicked the dirt and rocks as he paced around the fire. Debo and Nijal watched him quietly.

“You cannot reach Hollenguard anyway,” the commander said. “The valley is overrun with the Roukon.”

“No, no, no,” Debo said, hopping up on a stone and staring at Basil, still a head shorter than the man despite standing on the tips of his long toes. “You were not listening to me.”

Debo swept his palm in a downward arc.

“We will go under the valley to reach it.”

Basil stopped and turned to Debo, and Nijal saw the light of hope rekindled in his eyes. He knew what the commander wanted to do before the first word was free of his lips.

“The delvings lead beneath the valley to Hollenguard?” Basil asked.

“Of course they do. All roads lead to Hollenguard.”

Debo saw the look in both men's eyes and hopped off his rock, waving his hands and shaking his head.

“No!” he said emphatically, “you are too big for the delvings, especially you!”

His long finger jutted up at Nijal, who grimaced as though he took offense. Debo marched around the cinders of the fire, ranting.

“We must travel quickly. No time to show the shirefolk the way. You are blind in the tunnels, and clumsy. You cannot leap the voids and wriggle between the stones. You will fall through the cracks and be lost. Or worse, you will plug the cracks with your big bellies and my people will be trapped again!”

Debo paused in his march to look up at the men, who were quietly staring at him. He grimaced.

“No! No, no, no!”

Nijal saw Basil's face redden in anger and he quickly stepped in front of the commander. With a hand on his shoulder, he spoke in a quiet voice. Basil nodded and turned to walk away, his metal boots stomping loudly as he disturbed the loose rock beneath them. Nijal stared at Debo for a long moment, then turned and walked away as well.

Debo watched them both disappear into the clutter of tents and wagons and sleeping shirefolk. He wrung his hands together in frustration. It was impossible enough to lead his people, most of whom were not warriors, through the dark dangers of the delvings. He didn't know how far behind them in the tunnels the dark ones were, nor even if the creatures pursued them at all.

The thought occurred to him that he could simply turn and walk away, gather his people, and return to the delvings quietly. Debo couldn't think of the last time an outsider did him or any of his kin a favor, yet he could count on three fingers the number of times he'd helped outsiders in just the past few weeks! He had everything to lose

and nothing to gain by offering aid again. Not now. Not when his people depended on him to see them to Hollenguard.

“Courage and compassion.”

Elysandria's words rang in Debo's memories. He remembered the beautiful woman from the Mizzlemist; the meadow sprite that danced with the seasons and walked with the spirit of the stone and the ice and the water. He felt ashamed that he would tarnish the blessing she had given him by denying himself the compassion to help these men and women who relied on him for a means of escape. He felt shame that he lacked the courage to confront the difficulty of guiding them safely through the delvings.

Nijal heard light feet quickly padding up behind him and grinned. He reached out and touched Basil's arm. Both men turned when they heard Debo's little voice.

“I will take you,” Debo declared.

Nijal smiled down at his little friend. Debo's face became very serious.

“No wagons,” he said, waving his flat palm from side to side, “they are left here. Blankets only, no tents. Everyone must pack light. Only bring emergency food and stock up with plenty of water. I will see that everyone receives food while we travel the delvings.”

Basil nodded with every command. He wasn't about to argue. The delvings were foreign to him and he had no choice but to trust the experience of this little creature.

“We need, ah...” Debo thought for a moment, “glass. Jars! Bring bottles and jars and stoppers for them. Plugs.”

“Lids,” Nijal offered helpfully.

“Yes, lids!” Debo said, pointing a long finger, “and rope!”

“Anything else?” Basil asked.

Debo shook his head. "If I think of more I will tell you," he said. "Get your people ready and meet us at our camp before the sun is ... there."

Debo pointed directly upward. The men both looked up but couldn't possibly have seen exactly where he pointed, though it looked to be the center of the sky. That gave them a few hours. Basil watched as the glamorin bounded away, then turned to give Nijal an uncertain look as he crossed his arms.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Basil asked.

"Of course it is," Nijal said reassuringly. "What other choice do we have?"

“We cannot help you.”

Kesrin was furious at the denial. He kicked the base of a tree so hard with his plated boot that Kamil, who was sitting nearby, wouldn't have been shocked at all if the trunk had shattered and sent the tree falling into the sparkling pool of water.

“Sister, my people are being driven from their homes,” Kesrin said.

“I know. I am sorry.”

“They are dying!” Kesrin shouted.

“I know.”

Kesrin threw up his arms. “And you just don't care?”

“It isn't that I don't care,” Illysidyl said with a shake of her head. “It is simply that I cannot do anything.”

Kesrin growled a curse and stormed away. Kamil leapt up to follow, but Illysidyl raised a hand to halt him. They both watched until he had disappeared through the thick trees.

“There is little you could say to him to calm his fury,” Illysidyl said quietly. “As a Warden, he is tasked with the protection of his land and his people. It must be an incredible burden to see them wasting away before the Roukon horde and to be able to do nothing about it.”

“He speaks as more than just a Warden,” Kamil said. “You could at least give him some hope.”

“It is not my place to encourage hope where there is no hope to be found.”

Kamil glared at her bitterly. He took a long breath, released it, and then looked out over the pond.

“There is always hope,” he said.

A long stretch of silence followed as they both stared out over the sparkling water. Kamil rubbed his wrist gently, having found no further need of the splint after his revitalization in the Pale River. The sun rolled by overhead, casting long shadows off the high pine trees. The rushing, churning sound of the cascading waterfall and the cool mist that washed over their bodies was soothing.

After she had driven the Roukon curse from his body, Illysidyl had sat with Kamil for a good hour as he told her of Elysandria and of the journey they had shared from the inn all the way to Denshire and the battle at the hill. Kamil could give Illysidyl no assurances of Elysandria's safety, as he had become separated from her and was injured very early. When she had asked him if he thought she was alive, he could only tell the truth and say that he did. Tears had rolled down Illysidyl's cheeks when he had said that. Soon afterwards, Kesrin had confronted her to beg for aid.

“The Roukon will be here in six days,” Illysidyl said, breaking the long silence.

“What will you do?” Kamil asked.

“We will persevere. The Pale River protects us. The Roukon cannot bear to touch the waters. They will change course before entering these woods.”

“You are sure about that?”

Kamil turned to look at Illysidyl. He saw the surety in her eyes and pursed his lips.

“The Wardens believed that the Roukon wouldn't cross the Peregrinate River,” Kamil said sternly. “They were wrong.”

“The Peregrinate does not flow with the essence of life as the Pale River does,” Illysidyl answered. She noticed Kamil's heavy sigh before

he looked away from her again, and raised her voice as she elaborated.

“As I said before, the Roukon are creatures devoid of life. This river which birthed the Pale Sisters flows with the very essence of life. It has protected this forest since the stoutest tree in its bounds was but a seed.”

“It sounds like you will be just fine then,” Kamil said flatly.

Illysidyl could hear the shortness in his tone and clapped her mouth shut, letting the soothing sound of the water wash away some of the tension in the air before she spoke again and changed the subject.

“Do you know how the veil was created?” she asked.

Kamil was caught off guard by the question. He turned his attention back to Illysidyl and realized that no, he didn't in fact know how the veil had been created. He had assumed it had always been there just like the sky and the stars and the mountains. He shook his head from side to side.

“The veil which borders both Denshire and Valice to the east, the great expanse of mists that the veilrunners embark across from the port of Elderbrook to reach the eastern lands, did not always exist as it does today.”

Kamil watched Illysidyl's lips as she spoke, and his mind drifted back to his childhood and at staring out over the veil with his father. He would watch the veilrunners as they set sail from port until they disappeared over the horizon. The rolling mists of the veil were as beautiful to watch as they were deadly to touch. His father would warn him that any sailor who fell from the deck of a ship was never seen again. It made finding work in the rigging a lucrative but dangerous prospect, one his father had relished greatly.

When his father hadn't returned, Kamil would dream as a young boy that his ship had hit a rough spot of the veil. He pictured the mists rising over the hull in a raging storm and the ship listing hard to port. His father was standing high above the decks, his arm wrapped tightly with a rope as he fought to release the sails before the heavy

winds could roll the ship so sharply that everyone would slide from the decks and into the cold abyss of the dark unknown. At the end of his fanciful dream, the sails would be cut free and the ship saved just as the rope gave way and his father plunged into the depths.

“The veil was born of the Roukon,” Illysidyl said.

Kamil's thoughts were jarred back to reality. He stared at Illysidyl and repeated what she had said in his mind until he was sure he had heard her correctly.

“How is that possible?” he asked.

“When the Roukon feed, they leave behind a black storm in the sky. You have seen this, have you not?”

Kamil nodded.

“This storm is what is left of their corruption of life. It is fed constantly by every tree they rend asunder, every flower they wilt, every soul they steal away. It roils with the anger of unlife, building and building behind them as the Roukon move across the land consuming everything they touch. The wind cannot move the storm. The sun cannot burn it away. It simply sits in the sky and boils.

“Such is how the veil was born. Many, many years ago in a land long lost to the memories of its ancestors, another swarm of Roukon extinguished every spark of life there and birthed a mighty storm in the sky above. Beneath the vastness of the veil, Kamil, there was once a lush and vibrant land just like this one that was lost to the very same calamity that we now face.”

Illysidyl stood and walked to the edge of the pool. As she stepped into the milky water she could feel its coolness washing over her skin and dampening her dress. She relished the feeling, and she closed her eyes and spread her arms, allowing her fingers to dance along the surface as she walked until it was up around her waist. Kamil caught himself admiring the shape of her hips as the water churned around her.

“Although the veilrunners of Elderbrook are made of sturdy wood, it is not their construction which keeps them afloat as they set sail



across the veil,” Illysidyl continued as she knelt in the water.

When she turned, she was cupping her palms together as though she held something trapped between them. She stepped free of the water and back towards Kamil, who had stood and was staring curiously at her hands.

“It is these,” she said.

Illysidyl opened her palms and a light shone from them like a bright star. Kamil realized that she had plucked it from the countless lights that twinkled in the depths of the pond. It shone so brilliantly that he found it impossible to stare directly at it and had to hold up a hand to shield his eyes.

“Deep within the hull of every veilrunner there is a glass gem called a reservoir. Trapped within every gem is a single star gifted from the Pale Sisters.”

Illysidyl returned to the shore and produced a small, clear gemstone that hung from a silver chain. She touched the star to the gemstone, and Kamil watched as the light was transferred there. The brilliance of the star lit up the facets of the stone, causing it to shine like a lantern of perfectly white light. Illysidyl held the object out to Kamil.

“This,” she said, “is a Cynosure. It represents the strength and resilience of life. Because of these, the ships of Elderbrook are buoyed and stay above the mists of the veil. Because of these, the curse of the Roukon was washed away from you.”

Kamil reached out gingerly. The gemstone swung back and forth on its chain. Its luminescence was hypnotizing. He checked Illysidyl's eyes to ensure that taking it was all right with her, and she nodded with a small smile.

“Every Cynosure from our waters represents a part of the immortal life of a Pale Sister. We leave a piece of ourselves here in these waters, and this in turn blesses the water to give and protect life in the Awakening.”

“Why are you giving it to me?” Kamil asked.

Illysidyl stepped very close to him. She lifted the Cynosure from his hands and slipped the chain around his neck

“Because you might need it,” she said.

Kamil looked down at the gemstone that continued to glow as it rested upon his chest. All of the trees around him shone in the brilliant light which seemed to dance like a river in the sunlight. He was forced, finally, to slip it beneath his shirt lest he allow it to damage his eyes.

Before he could thank her, a sound caught his attention. Both he and Illysidyl stared downriver, their ears perked. A loud, repetitive whoosh was echoing up the water, amplified by it and growing closer and closer. They both saw a long, dark shape passing through the trees, and Kamil instinctively reached for the knife that was no longer tucked behind his belt.

“Roukon!” he shouted.

“No,” Illysidyl said curiously, “it is not the Roukon.”

A shape emerged from the trees, bearing quickly down upon them. Its long, serpentine body stretched far behind it amongst the thick pine trunks. Large wings beat the air, the tips brushing the trees at both sides of the river. It was a massive, dark-scaled creature with wicked, beady eyes.

It reached the pool and beat its wings fiercely, nearly knocking both Kamil and Illysidyl over with the force of the gusts it sent up. They saw, then, that a red-haired woman was gingerly held within its talons. Her face was pale, her lips blue, her eyes rolled back in her head. A dark-haired woman leapt from the creature’s back and into the pond with a splash, then struggled through the deep water until she could hold her arms up over her head.

“Give her to me, quickly!” came Elysandria's voice.

Kamil's heart nearly burst from his chest. He ran into the water and shouted her name, but if she heard him she paid him no mind.

The serpent opened its talons and the woman rolled into Elysandria's arms. She cradled her there, reaching up and brushing her hair out of her deathly pale face.

"Kitarin," Elysandria said as she stared hopefully down at her friend, "the Pale River embraces you."

With that, both women disappeared beneath the churning, frothing surface. The serpent, kicking up walls of water, beat its wings mightily and flew up to perch upon the rocks at the top of the waterfall that fed the pool. It craned its long neck downward and intently watched the place where the women had disappeared. Kamil fought through the current to the spot where he had last seen them, shouting Elysandria's name.

He saw the dim shape of Kitarin submerged there and bent to slip his arms beneath her. As he lifted the Warden free from the water, he felt a sharp pang of remorse. Kitarin had the grimace of death upon her face. Whatever hope that Elys may have had in getting her here to heal her, it seemed that she was too late.

Kesrin's voice cried out from the trees.

"Kitarin!" the Warden shouted. With a loud splash he was in the pool and fighting his way over to where Kamil stood with his twin sister in his arms.

Kamil turned and, ensuring he had Kitarin's head above the deep water, cradled her carefully as he brought her to her brother. Kesrin reached out and took her, touching her cheek with a hand that was still gauntleted in leather and metal.

The heartbreaking scene nearly overwhelmed Kamil. He reached out to touch Kesrin's arm and was helping to lead him and his sister out of the pool when Kitarin coughed.

Kesrin laughed and cried, stroking her cheek as he carried her ashore. Kamil smiled after them as he lifted one foot after the other against the current and followed. He looked around at the surface of the water but saw no sign of Elysandria.

Kitarin was laid carefully upon the grass. Her bright, emerald eyes

fluttered open and she smiled up at her brother. Her initial confusion was quickly chased away by her joy at seeing Kesrin again.

Kesrin lifted her and held her tightly. She wrapped her arms around him and the two embraced each other tightly. Both cried tears of joy.

Kamil stood beside them at the water's edge. Nearby, the surface was disturbed as the water began to rise of its own accord. It slipped away, revealing long, raven-black hair, pale skin, beautiful dark eyes and a glowing smile.

Elysandria stood there, staring up from the water at Kamil with eyes that betrayed the happiness that filled her heart at seeing him again. Kamil stared back with the same dumbfounded look of wonder that had so endeared him to her in the first place. Tears rolled down Elys' cheeks, masked by the water that still washed back from her skin.

The water of the pool lapped at her naked body, its current driving around her shoulders and the curve of her breasts, which were barely concealed beneath to churning depths. She modestly stood low to cover herself with the milky water, her clothing having been lost when she dove to the depths and took on the aspect of the river. Kamil caught himself staring and quickly lifted his eyes to hers. Elysandria laughed.

“Stop staring and give me your cloak,” she said.

Kamil sat next to Kesrin and Kitarin, who were still reveling in their reunion and sharing stories of what had happened to them over the past few days. All three stared after Elysandria, who had wrapped herself up in Kamil's cloak before running to Illysidyl to share a hug that lasted for several minutes. Both D'wammish women spoke rapidly to each other, and their words were carried on the wind to the others. While the Wardens and Kamil could not understand them, their thoughts of joy and love and also of fear and determination were speaking to them on the breeze. Illysidyl eventually walked back to the banks of the pool. Kamil and the Wardens stood to greet her.

"Come," the Sister said, "we will outfit all of you for your journey."

Elysandria approached as well and Illysidyl slid an arm around her. Both Sisters then turned and led the way deeper into the Awakening.

Kesrin scowled and looked at his sister as if he were going to refuse to follow them, and Kitarin laughed as though she had seen that look on her brother's face far too often. She lightly punched his shoulder and then graciously accepted his help into the saddle of his cliffjumper before he grabbed the reins and led the animal and Kitarin after the Pale Sisters.

Kamil followed quietly behind. He watched Elysandria as she stepped briskly through the forest on her bare feet. He remembered when Elys had been forced to walk barefoot through the Mizzlemist and all of the thorns and brambles that had torn at her soles. He winced, hoping this forest was kinder to her.

With a mighty roar and a flash of green scales, the Empress landed before all of them. The serpent's head snaked down, and she sniffed at both D'wammish women in a cautious manner. The cliffjumper reared up and hissed desperately with fear, and it was all Kesrin could do to calm the animal back down as Kitarin grasped its neck tightly. Kamil drew forth his dragon and prepared to load it.

Illysidyl lifted a hand and touched the serpent's snout. The Empress closed her eyes and seemed to relax, lowering her outstretched wings back to her sides. Her sharp talons began to knead the underbrush at the Sister's soft touch.

"You have been away from home for far too long," Illysidyl said quietly.

The Empress opened her beady eyes and nodded her big head. When Illysidyl turned her hand to scratch the underside of her chin, she lifted her snout helpfully. It reminded Kamil of a dog enjoying the attention of its master.

"I miss the old songs," the Empress said.

Elysandria watched, dumbfounded. The tone of the Empress' voice was calm and even, which was in stark contrast to the impetuous tone she'd had while keeping Elys and Kitarin captive atop the towers of the academy.

Illysidyl nodded up at the serpent with a look of sad pity in her eyes. She dropped her hand and the Empress stared at her, as if awaiting instructions.

"You may stay," Illysidyl declared.

The Empress spread her wings. Rushes of air blew against all present as they watched the serpent take to the air. Her long neck kept her head level with Illysidyl's as her bulk began to lift.

"Thank you, Mother," she said. The Empress continued to gain altitude as she navigated up through the thick canopy of the evergreens. Elysandria watched her go until she finally saw the last of the long, deadly barbed tail disappear amidst the tangle of branches. She looked over at Illysidyl.

"Mother?" she asked.

Illysidyl began walking again. "Not literally," she said, "but when she was a hatchling I attended to her and her brothers. They lived here in the Awakening with us well before the Pale River gave you

life. One morning, we awoke to find that her brothers had disappeared. Thinking that they had left her, she grew distant, impatient. When a year had passed without any word from them, she started to become hostile to the world, and nothing in my words or songs could soothe her. One morning, she was simply gone as well.”

Elysandria found it difficult to have any pity for the monstrous beast after she had treated her and Kitarin the way she had. The look on Illysidyl's face, however, gave her pause to speak ill of the creature. Besides, she reasoned, without the Empress, Kitarin would have succumbed to her sickness and died.

Elys looked back over her shoulder at Kitarin, who had a similarly callous look in her eyes after having watched the Empress leave. When Kitarin saw Elysandria looking back at her she nodded her head, and silent understanding passed between them. The Warden then offered her a beautiful, bright smile which lifted Elys' heart. She smiled back and allowed her dark thoughts fall away from her before she turned to continue walking with her fellow Sister.

Kamil followed quietly behind all of them and heard Kesrin mention to Kitarin that their family was on the road to Hollenguard. The Wardens both sounded happy about this. It was a sure bet that the two would be on their way there soon, and Kamil would have to decide if he would be joining them or if he would try to make it to Elderbrook instead. That was assuredly where Nijal would be heading.

“Do you think we will be safe at Hollenguard?” Kitarin asked. Her voice sounded weak from her ordeal, but she was happy to be with family and friends again.

Kesrin bit his lip for a long moment before looking up at his sister with resolve in his eyes. “It has served its purpose in the past,” he said. “It will serve us again now.”

Kitarin smiled. She knew that her brother was being overly optimistic in order to brighten her hopes.

“At least we will all be together,” she said.

Kesrin nodded. He glanced at Kamil, who offered him a nod as well. There was a long silence that followed, broken only by the

snapping of twigs and the rustling of the foliage as they trudged ever deeper into the ancient forest.

In the early afternoon they began to see other Sisters. All were dressed in elegant finery that accentuated their features while still flowing loosely from their hips and elbows. Every Sister was dressed in white, and every Sister had long, raven-black hair just like Illysidyl and Elysandria did. As the companions passed through a vineyard with multi-tiered rows of wooden trellises tangled with grapevines, the Sisters would stop gathering the fruits to watch them.

“It seems we are a bit of a curiosity here,” Kesrin said.

Kitarin giggled and sat up tall in her saddle, offering smiles and a polite wave as they passed. Only a few of the Sisters responded with gestures of welcome. Most of them could only stare incredulously.

Illysidyl led them up a series of steps that were carved into a green hillside and covered with slabs of white stone. At the top was a balcony made of the same stone as the steps, with tall, elegant archways and a series of benches. Each bench was covered with beautifully stitched cushions. The balcony overlooked the wide breadth of a lake whose clear water sparkled in the bright afternoon sun.

“Please, take your rest here,” Illysidyl said, spreading her arms. “Attend to your weariness at the lake, if you so desire. I will see to it that you receive food and drinks.”

Kesrin looped the reins of his cliffjumper over the balcony's lowest railing and helped Kitarin to dismount. They both removed their boots and quickly found a cushioned bench to lay back and rest upon. Kamil watched Elys as she turned to leave with Illysidyl. Aside from their initial words, she hadn't said anything at all to him while they had traveled through the Awakening.

“Elys!” He shouted her name before he even understood what he would say to her.

Elysandria turned in mid-step to look back at him. Illysidyl turned as well and looked at her sister, and then at Kamil, then back at her Sister with an odd expression. Elys was smiling brightly, and with



Kamil's cloak still wrapped tightly around her she hurried across the balcony until she stood before him.

"I'll be back," she said.

Standing on the tips of her toes, she gave Kamil a kiss on the cheek.

Elys turned back around and gave Illysidyl an admonishing look when she saw the expression on her sister's face. She quickly walked past her and away, and Illysidyl stared at Kamil for a long moment before she turned and disappeared after her. Kitarin and Kesrin exchanged a quiet smile.

Kamil looked down at his shirt and found it to be twisted awkwardly, pulling at it self-consciously until it was straightened. He glanced up at the Wardens, who were continuing to smile at him, and felt his cheeks heating up.

"What?" he asked with a grin.

Kesrin just gave him an exaggerated shrug. Kitarin laughed and lay back on one of the benches. With a heavy sigh, Kamil removed his boots and found a bench to lie upon as well. He propped his head up in his hand while he lay upon his side on the cushions and stared out over the still water of the lake. It was so peaceful and his body was so tired that, before he even realized it, he was fast asleep.

When he awoke, the sun was a bit lower in the sky. Kesrin and Kitarin were quietly chatting and eating from a very generous platter of basted meat and various darkly colored fruits that had been served. A couple of Pale Sisters, whispering to themselves, were staring at him when he opened his eyes.

"Good morning, Kamil," Kitarin said when she noticed him lift himself up on his elbows. "Care for some grapes?"

Kamil sat up and stretched, still feeling groggy. His body, though free of the pain that had wrenched his gut that morning, still felt stiff and exhausted. He gratefully sat forward and took a large portion of the food, finding the meat to be perfectly prepared and the fruits to be ripe and delicious.

The Sisters lifted a carafe filled with a light violet liquid and poured him a goblet of sweet smelling wine, which he graciously accepted. The Wardens watched the Sisters with bemused grins as they stared at Kamil while they served him. Kamil noticed as well and tried unsuccessfully to pretend that he didn't.

When Elysandria arrived, Kamil was the last to notice. His face was hidden in a tipped glass as he enjoyed the last drops of the sweet drink he had been served. Kesrin and Kitarin went quiet and sat back to watch. The two Sisters who had been attending to them excused themselves without a sound.

Elys was dressed in a beautifully cured leather suit, studded with rows of metal plates that protected her chest and arms. Leather skirts extended well past her knees, allowing her the freedom to walk with a touch of the same ethereal quality she had always evoked. Her feet were comfortably tucked into a pair of leather boots lined with fur. Her hair, usually free to lie upon her shoulders, was tied back in a tail. There was also a baldric slung over her shoulder which secured a long claymore of finely folded metal, sitting crosswise with its handle extending well over her shoulder.

She walked with the same regal air she had shown when addressing the Wardens upon the hill in Denshire and with a determined power to her footsteps that mimicked her trek deep into the Glimmerden to rescue Nijal and Kamil from the cells of the glamorfolk. The scattered pieces of her stalwart heart that Kamil had caught glimpses in the days since he had met her came together into the warrior he now saw before him.

Swallowing the wine that had stalled in his mouth when he saw her, he suddenly felt every bit like the young, naive man he had been when he first met her.

“Aren't you a bit overdressed?” came a flat voice.

Everyone turned and saw Illysidyl standing at the base of the carved steps, holding the reins of two horses that stamped at the ground behind her. Both were a deep sorrel color, their tan reminiscent of the hue of Elysandria's garment, and their manes caught the light of the sun in a burning auburn. Each animal was fit with a gorgeously inlaid saddle and simple yet elegant leather

barding.

Elysandria made a show of lifting her hand and pulling at the hem of her long leather gloves, tightening their fit around her fingers.

“Where is *my* horse?” she asked as she stepped lightly down the steps. Kamil walked to the edge, and the Wardens stepped up behind him. He could hear Kesrin over his shoulder, nonchalantly popping grapes into his mouth and chewing with a quiet, wet, crunching sound.

Illysidyl did not answer right away. Instead, she watched Elys as she descended the stone steps all the way to the bottom. The two stood eye to eye for a long moment. Despite their similar appearances, the two women looked vastly different. One stood in a demure yet beautiful white dress, and the other in a fierce set of sturdy leather armor.

“I had thought that now that you have come home, you would stay,” Illysidyl said. “It is safe here.”

Elysandria leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her fellow Sister. Illysidyl stood a moment, still holding the reins, before she finally released them to wrap her arms tightly around Elys. She buried her face in Elysandria's shoulder, and Kamil could tell that the woman was sobbing quietly. They spoke to one another quietly in their own language. Illysidyl's voice was muffled, but the Wardens and Kamil could still feel the sadness and the loneliness of what was said as the wind once again carried the emotions to them.

“Are you leaving us for him?” Illysidyl asked quietly.

“I am leaving for all of them.”

“What about your home?”

Elysandria pulled back. Illysidyl looked at her through shimmering eyes.

“My home is no longer beneath these trees,” Elys said.

Illysidyl lifted her head slightly in understanding and then gave

her another brisk hug before grasping the reins and handing them over. Elysandria glanced up the stairs and nodded, and Kamil nodded back. Followed by the Wardens, he descended until they all stood beside their friend.

Other Sisters approached from the shores of the lake and the vineyards and from the hidden corners of the forest where they all lived together. Many came forward and hugged Elysandria, and she returned every single one. All spoke words of comfort, sad words of parting, and hopeful words of meeting again soon. Elysandria brought the two horses to her friends and handed the reins to Kamil and to Kitarin.

Kitarin quickly hopped up into her saddle. Kamil did so much more awkwardly, requiring a subtle push from Elys when it appeared that few were looking. Kesrin popped one final grape into his mouth and mounted his cliffjumper.

Flanked by her many sisters, Illysidyl stood and watched as they all prepared to go. Kamil reached down into his shirt and produced the Cynosure, holding it forth and allowing its brilliance to shine upon all of the faces that surrounded him.

“Thank you for saving me,” he said to Illysidyl.

Illysidyl smiled. Elysandria hopped up behind Kamil on the horse and wrapped her arms around his waist. Kamil offered her a little grin over his shoulder and patted her hand before taking the reins and lightly tapping the horse’s sides with his heels to encourage it to canter away.

Pale hands were raised, all waving goodbye as the companions left the shores of the lake. Elysandria turned in her saddle and raised a hand as well. She called out to Illysidyl just before they disappeared behind the thick trunk of a towering evergreen.

“Be safe!” she said.

Every mile that was traveled in the dark, winding highways of the delvings felt like ten to Nijal and the refugees. For each cavern with enough height that even the innkeeper himself could stand comfortably, there were three so low that the people of Denshire had to bend at the waist to proceed. Despite the slow progress, the glamorfolk made no complaints. They took it upon themselves to help out whenever possible, guiding the nearly blind and woefully underequipped refugees on safe paths.

The tunnels were not lit by any sort of fluorescent light like the Glimmerden had been. They were carved of cold, dark stone. Early on, Debo had instructed many of his kin to gather the pupae of a rather slimy denizen of the dark, placing them in a series of bottles that Nijal had helped to gather up for them. The pupae gave off a dull glow which was far from ideal for seeing in the gloom. However, when they came upon a large, damp cavern filled with black moss, Debo instructed everyone further in gathering the moss and placing hefty sums of it in the jars with the pupae.

When the creatures began to eat the moss their bodies glowed so brightly that the jars lit up as though the light of the Pike itself were trapped within. Once this had been accomplished, Nijal and many of the Wardens and refugees had far less goose eggs growing from bumped heads.

Constant rests were a necessity. There were many injuries regardless of the lighted jars. Debo ran from the front of the column to the rear ensuring that the glamorfolk knew what to do to help, and encouraging some of the more exhausted shirefolk to get up and continue for the sake of their kinsmen. Nijal's respect for the little one grew tremendously, as did Basil's.

Many times there were forks in the path leading up and down and backwards, and all the while head counts had to be maintained. Nijal often walked with Asphodel and helped her to keep track of the children, who were behaving extraordinarily well despite the terrible conditions. He knew that they all looked up to him, and so he made

sure to tell each and every one of them how proud he was.

The largest impediment on the first day came during a careful descent of a sharp and narrow passage. Halfway through, water as frigid as the snow atop the highest peaks of the mountains was cascading out of moss-covered cracks in the ceiling, creating a slick but jagged slide of sorts where one could easily lose their footing. The effort to descend this tunnel became such an ordeal that, by the time every person had passed through, it had been several hours and everyone was exhausted, including the glamorfolk.

Luckily, the tunnel exited into a large cavern. The water fed a sump which drained into unseen cracks, and more than half of the space was a raised floor that was moderately dry and free of moss. A halt was called where all present could lay their heads down and recuperate from the trials of the day.

Nijal made sure to find Asphodel and the children, intent on telling some tall tales as they often expected of him before they would go to sleep. He knew that they wouldn't be able to stay in the cavern long before it was time to move on. They could only guess at where the Roukon were in their pursuit, or even if the pursuit continued at all, but should they be caught here there would be no hope for them.

He was happy to see that all of the children were already fast asleep. Their little bodies surrounded their teacher, who looked up and smiled at Nijal in the low light as he tiptoed close. He had a seat next to her and they sat quietly for a time, not wanting to disturb the kids. Even when Asphodel had fallen asleep, her head lolled over onto Nijal's shoulder, he found that slumber would not take him. Instead, he stared out over the pool in the dimly lit cavern, listening to the falling water in the near distance and thinking about Kamil and Elysandria.

He hadn't realized how much time had passed as he sat in quiet contemplation when he saw Basil and a few Wardens walking amongst the refugees and waking them up with soft voices and gentle nudges.

“Didn't you sleep?”

Nijal turned and looked at Asphodel, who was staring up at him with concern in her blue eyes. He smiled and nodded.

“For a time,” he lied.

The journey resumed, and for many hours it was relatively easy travel. While there were a few tight squeezes that held people up, and one so small that a stubborn shireman had to be convinced to leave some of his belongings behind lest he hold up the entire procession of people yet again, the delvings for the most part were giving everybody a well-deserved break from hardship. Debo and his glamorfolk even managed to produce berries that were rationed out and had a delightful tang in their juicy center.

At one point another halt was called. Nijal left the children and moved to the front of the group, where Basil and Debo stood staring up at the tall ceiling of an expansive cavern. Light from the midday sun knifed through the darkness from a series of perfectly round holes high above them. The sunlight shone down upon piles of debris and decay that were formed in natural rows extending all the way to the far wall.

“I need all but a small rearguard to the front,” Basil said. Two Wardens clapped their fists to their chests and filed backward through the refugees to carry out his orders.

“I know this place,” Basil said to Nijal. “It is the chimneys, a part of the Barren Valley. The highway north out of Elderbrook curves west and then north for many miles to bypass this place. It is dangerous.”

“Why is that?” Nijal asked.

“Because it is cursed.”

Nijal scoffed. Superstition ruled much of the populace of both Valice and Denshire, he thought to himself. He had taken the trip to and from Elderbrook many times and had heard tales of the Barren Valley. Something about the geography or the ecology there had killed all of the plants and made the soil dark and incapable of supporting life. Despite his skeptical nature, however, he gripped his hammer a little tighter.

When the Wardens arrived, Basil separated them into patrol groups and sent them forward, branching out from the main company

that he led as he advanced beneath the chimneys. The refugees and the glamorfolk carefully followed. All were sure to take routes around the tall piles of refuse that lay directly beneath the holes high above them.

Nijal walked beside Basil, who held his staff firmly before him. Halfway through the cavern, as they passed near one of the refuse piles, Nijal glanced over curiously and saw a series of polished white stones with grey mottling upon them. He stopped and stared for a moment, tilting his head, and then turned his hammer over in his hands so that he could reach out with the handle.

He poked a rock. It rolled and clacked against another, then spun slightly and rolled forward. Inexplicably, it cracked.

“Basil,” he hissed. The Warden Commander stopped and looked at where the handle of the hammer was pointing.

The rock spun once and seemed to rattle, then cracked some more. With a dull chirping sound, the rock bounced slightly, and then a pair of sharp pincers jutted from its surface. Nijal realized, as the cracks continued to form, that the rock was actually a large egg. He came to this realization just as the little creature inside the egg began to chirp irately.

All around him the pillars of light from the holes high above were dimming as though the sun were going behind a dark cloud. The loud chirping from the egg was answered by a tide of clacks and chirps as many-legged creatures with chitinous bodies and long, sharp pincers began to crowd down into the holes and skitter along the ceiling. In a matter of seconds, there were hundreds of them.

“Move!” Basil shouted.

The refugees, many screaming with fear, began to run. The Wardens closed ranks to prevent panic, scooping up the younger shirelings and handing them to men and women as everyone made for the far side of the cavern. Just as the refugees at the head of the column were rushing into the narrow exit, the chitinous swarm of insects had reached the ground.

The cavern began to echo with the sounds of the zephyrs.



Nijal ran against the tide until he found Asphodel. The children were linked to her arms by two chains. "Go!" he shouted, and she ran past him. He counted heads and discovered that one child was missing, so he lifted his gaze and scanned the darkness, desperately searching for her.

He spotted her quickly. She followed close behind, reaching out with her little fingers but unable to link up with her classmates. The mass of insects were rushing forth from the walls and closing the distance rapidly.

Nijal ran to her side. Two of the terrors descended upon them and he swung his hammer. It connected against a pincer with a dull crack that sent the creature stumbling to the ground, its head violently thrown to the side. As it struggled to get to its feet, the other one lunged.

The only thing Nijal could do as the weight of the hammer carried him off balance was to throw the back of his shoulders up against the monstrous insect. He felt burning pain as the pincers sliced into his skin, but he also managed to impact the creature squarely and throw it off balance. It skittered over and past him and slammed into a refuse pile, sending up a black cloud of dust and debris.

He scooped up the little girl, who was wailing in terror, and held her tightly to his chest with one arm as he gripped his hammer in his free hand and sprinted for the exit. A Warden met him halfway and covered his retreat, her zephyr bursting with a concussion that split the air. He had to duck low to make it into the narrow passage, and for a while he felt as though he were running with his eyes closed as he entered the unlit highways of the delvings yet again.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom of the jars he saw that he was passing rows of Wardens and glamorfolk, all facing back into the cavern of insects with weapons at the ready. They shouted for him to continue moving and he did so, his legs pumping ferociously as he clung tightly to the child he had rescued. When he reached the refugees, he stumbled over divots in the stone and gritted his teeth as he felt the ground beginning to rush up at him. He let go of his hammer and twisted sideways to protect the girl from the impact.

Instead, he was caught by Asphodel, who steadied him. Her face

was grimy and streaked with tears. She took the little girl with quite a bit of effort, as she had locked her arms thoroughly around Nijal's shoulders. As the girl was taken from him, he saw streaks of blood on her little arms and hands and worried for a moment that she had been injured. When he lifted his fingers to his own shoulders and felt the bloody wounds there, the pain that had before been but a dull ache suddenly burned through him like a blazing fire.

Vaguely, Nijal heard Asphodel scream his name as he collapsed. Then, he knew nothing.

The refugees continued onward sullenly. While the creatures had initially tried to pursue them up the passage, the concussions of the zephyrs and the sharp sting of glamorin spears in the narrow bottleneck had driven them off. The skill of the Wardens and the ingenuity of their little guides had saved the refugees from suffering any casualties.

Except for Nijal.

Bound tightly with makeshift bandages and carried by two Wardens upon a stretcher made from blankets and two Warden's staves, Nijal became a burden for the refugees' progress. Despite the awkwardness in carrying him with them however, nobody complained. The man had suffered a grave wound to save a little girl. That little girl insisted on walking at his side and did her best to keep his hair out of his eyes despite the fact that he wouldn't open them.

The day following the attack at the chimneys was the worst day traveling the delvings. Jagged cracks and deep pits, what Debo called voids, were scattered along their path. A missed step would send the unwary hurtling into the unknown depths with little for them to catch their fall along the cloven, smooth rock.

The glamorfolk showed an aptitude for leaping from one narrow ledge to the other, and would do their best to guide those less agile than themselves through the passages. Nijal's passing proved to be an incredible challenge, but it was one that Basil and the Wardens bore without protest. By the time they had finally crossed the last of the voids, most of the day had been used up and they had traveled little more than a mile.

Morale was very low. Though tempers were short and grumbling abounded, there were none who gave in to despair. The people of Denshire were a hardy folk and bore the travails of their journey with grim determination. Debo and his glamorfolk grew fond of this trait, and with growing respect they continued their stalwart assistance to these brave men and women.

Asphodel and the children surrounded Nijal as the refugees slept that evening, though it hardly could be told whether it was truly night or if the sun still shone upon the surface. All sense of time had long fled, and although they had only been trekking through the delvings for a few days, it might as well have been a week or more to their minds. Nijal slept fitfully, reliving the nightmare of the insects that had felled him. The little girl that he had saved would awaken every time Nijal made a sound and press a damp cloth to his forehead, which calmed him almost immediately.

The following day saw sharp descents in their journey. Basil, at one point, called a halt and considered turning around to try one of the smaller branches they had passed earlier in the day, as he felt that if they went much further downward they would fall out of the bottom of the world. Debo insisted that it was the correct way, and Basil eventually relented to the glamorin's caving expertise.

The air continued to get colder and colder as they descended. Streams of water would break into the paths from cracks and small passages and pool in opaque sumps that everyone did their best to avoid. There was little to see for miles and miles except stark stone, dimly lit by the larvae of the bugs that were starting to lose their incandescent glow as they ran out of moss to eat.

The stone began to take on a dark color and reflect light as though it were glassy obsidian. Pieces of stone that had fallen or been chipped away from the walls began to crunch underfoot. In some places, the dark stone gave way to smooth crystalline walls that looked like windows with no view.

There were gasps of awe and wonder when the refugees emerged one by one into a tall cavern carved entirely of white and clear crystal. The ground was made up of sharply jutting crystal shards that threatened to tear at the soles of everyone's boots. Above them, ascending well past the light of their jars, long crystals extended from the walls at every angle imaginable in the shape of huge obelisks. Some jutted only partway, while others extended all the way from one end of the cavern to the other.

A quick circuit of the chamber revealed that there was no exit, save perhaps high above them in the shadows. Basil attempted to mount one of the crystal outcroppings, but it cracked and groaned

under the weight of his boot and he quickly thought better of it. He kicked a nearby formation and it shattered and sent pieces rebounding in every direction.

“We must turn back,” he said. “We will find an alternate route. We passed a wide branch about two hours ago.”

Debo handed his spear over to the Warden Commander.

“Wait,” the little creature said.

Debo hefted a small pack and, with an impressive leap, he was upon a low formation of crystal. A half dozen leaps later and he was running along an outcropping fifty feet higher. One more leap and Basil could no longer see him as he had passed beyond the light of the jars.

One by one, the glamorfolk followed. They leapt with precision and agility, following the same route as their leader. Before long, they could only be heard quietly in the distance high above. The Wardens were all left standing around and staring up into the gloom, many idly holding a spear that had been handed off to them.

Silence followed. Long minutes passed where nothing was heard at all. The refugees and the Wardens began to whisper amongst themselves. Some even surmised that after all the travails of dragging the shirefolk along with them, the little creatures had finally decided they were no longer worth the trouble. A few murmurs of 'direkin' again began to echo.

Basil held out hope, as did many of the others. The past few days had shown him that the courage and compassion of these little creatures far overshadowed any story of malice and thievery that had so accompanied their kind in the tales the commander had heard in the past.

His faith was justified when a long length of rope fluttered down from high above, rebounding off of a few crystals and then slapping against the far wall. Two of the glamorfolk leapt down and unhitched it from the various places where it had become caught until it finally hung free at the far end of the cavern.

“Rearguard,” Basil said, pointing to two Wardens. They saluted and left the cavern. He pointed at another group nearby.

“Get the children up there first,” he said. They complied. Asphodel walked with the children to the wall and spoke softly to them before they were deposited, one by one, upon a Warden's back. The Wardens would then slowly ascend up into the darkness. It was hardest to get the little girl to leave Nijal's side, but she did so with few sniffles.

While the children were being carried out of the cavern, Basil took stock of the refugees. Those who were too weak or unskilled to make the climb were separated, and over the course of the next several hours each was secured to the rope and hauled up by Wardens at the top.

Throughout the day, the exodus from the crystalline cavern continued. Above, those who had completed the journey found a place to sit and take what rest they could. Glamorfolk constantly moved up and then back down the cavern using the crystals to watch over every refugee, ensuring that they had a good grip and took the safest route. The rope held, despite being frayed at places by the sharp crystal.

In the end, it was Basil and the rearguard with Nijal on his stretcher who remained below. The man was far too large for any one Warden to successfully climb the rope whilst carrying him on their back. In the end, Nijal's entire stretcher had to be hauled up. The Wardens and glamorfolk high above heaved as they lifted the dead weight, and Basil winced every time the stretcher slammed and scraped against the sharp cavern walls.

The last to arrive at the top, Basil found that there was a wide opening and a very comfortable looking passageway that promised at least a bit of easy travel once everyone was ready to move again. A short camp was called to welcome sighs and every man, woman, and child closed their eyes for a well-deserved slumber.

When Basil opened his eyes again after having taken a short nap, he saw that Nijal was sitting up across from him. Basil smiled, but the look on Nijal's face caused him to hesitate before speaking. He heard, then, what Nijal must have heard. Far below them, from the depths of the crystalline cavern, came a constant, dull growl. It sounded like rocks groaning and clacking and crunching as they slid down a mountainside. The crystals caught the sound and echoed it upward

until it seemed as though it were coming from every direction.

The refugees were awakening in a panic. Many remembered that the attack upon their hill had started with the same horrible sounds. The children were wailing with the memory while Asphodel did her very best to calm them. All around, the snapping of zephyrs being readied could be heard as the Wardens began hefting their weapons.

A loud cacophony of rending and cracking echoed up the cavern, followed by louder growls. Basil got to his feet and stepped to the ledge with Debo. They both stared down into the depths.

“Can you see them?” the commander asked quietly.

Debo nodded. He could see them very clearly.

“It is the Roukon?”

Debo nodded again.

“How many?”

Debo gripped his spear with both hands and leaned against it as he rested the butt upon the stone ground. He looked up at Basil with his fierce eyes.

“Many,” the little creature said.

There was another crack, and the sound of skittering rock and crystal. The growls increased in intensity, fueled by what sounded like feral anger. Debo looked down again.

Basil turned to see many of his Wardens standing nearby and awaiting his orders. He nodded to them, and then shouted down the passageway. “Wardens, get these people up. We are moving. Now.”

Another series of reverberating cracks were heard, followed by an even louder din of roars. Basil stepped to the ledge again. It sounded to the commander as though the delvings themselves were collapsing.

“What are they doing?” Basil asked.

For a long time Debo stared down into the gloom while the horrible, echoing cracks and shattering sounds and the angry roars continued unabated. Debo finally turned his head and smiled up at the commander.

“The cavern is defeating them,” Debo said. “They cannot make the climb.”

“Good,” Basil said, “let’s make it as difficult for them as possible.”

Many Wardens overheard Basil and guessed at his intentions. They stepped to the ledge beside their commander and raised their zephyrs. A series of concussions followed as the weapons were fired, striking the large crystal formations with bursts of sound that sent flakes and shards shattering in every direction. Large clumps of the crystals collapsed and fell in what seemed to Basil to be slow motion, erupting against other formations and carrying them to the depths as well.

Amidst the chaos of the destruction in the gloom below bellowed the frustrated roars of the Roukon.

Basil smiled in satisfaction. He turned and saw Nijal struggling to get to his feet and quickly rushed over to lend him his arm.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No,” Nijal said with a wince as he stood and tested his back with a stretch, “but I’m not staying here, and you are through carrying me.”

The commander nodded. He bent to where he had been sleeping and lifted Nijal’s large hammer, presenting it to him again. Nijal reached out and took the weapon gratefully.

“You would make a terrible Warden,” the commander remarked as the hammer passed between them. “You cannot seem to keep hold of your weapon.”



After leaving the confines of the Awakening and crossing the expanse of the Pale River at a wide ford, the horses and cliffjumper quickly spirited their riders across the plains of northern Denshire. It was well into the early evening before they had departed the forest, but the steeds still made very good time. They cut to the southeast, hoping to reach the highway that would eventually rendezvous with the Peregrinate River and then take them into the highlands to Hollenguard, where Kesrin and Kitarin hoped that their family waited for them.

The horses were so fast and so spirited that Kesrin had to fight to keep up on his stalwart cliffjumper. They reached the highway well after sundown and were forced to slow their mounts to a trot so as to avoid any mishaps like a hoof twisting in a rut or other unseen dangers. Eventually, despite their desire to cover as much ground as possible, it was so dark out that a halt had to be called.

Camp was set up upon a hill. The saddlebags of the two horses that had been gifted to them contained ample provisions for food, water, and shelter. It amazed Kamil at the amount of invaluable supplies that could be fit into what seemed so small a space. Bedrolls lined with warm fur and protected on the outside by thickly cured leather promised a comfortable nights rest.

This far north in Denshire there was hardly a tree to be found. The ground was coarse and rocky, and the grass was tall and stale and seemed to go on for miles in every direction. When the wind blew, the fields of grass would sway like ripples on a golden lake. Even in the twilight of the stars and the glowing rings of the Pike, the sight was a beautiful one to behold.

Kitarin sat near Kesrin, who played the flute that he had retrieved from their room back at their family home. His song was soft and lilting and the melody danced along with the gentle wind that blew across the campground. It held a quiet, dignified melody of hope that bolstered everyone's spirits as they listened quietly.

After a time, Kitarin rolled over onto her back and stared up at the night sky. She began to hum the same tune that Kesrin played, and for a long moment they performed quietly and in perfect harmony. Kamil found it mesmerizing.

“It is obviously a song that is very special to them,” Elysandria said. She sat with Kamil at the other side of camp.

Kamil nodded. It felt wrong to speak. Even Elys' beautiful voice seemed out of place when it interrupted Kesrin's flute and Kitarin's soft hums. They sat quietly, listening until the notes tapered off into silence and only the blowing grass and the soft sounds of nighttime insects squeaked and clicked around them.

“You can feel the power of their song right here,” Elys said, touching her heart. Kamil could see the twilight flickering off of tears that had formed in her eyes.

“Thank you for coming with us,” Kamil said to her.

Elys turned and smiled at him in the darkness. Her eyes sparkled as if to say, 'of course I came with you. Where else would I go?'

“What will we do once we reach Hollenguard?” he asked.

Elysandria sighed. She looked to the east and pondered the question herself. Hollenguard, though storied for its role in saving those who had sheltered within it in the past, offered little hope to her in the way of real protection. She vividly recalled the last castle that she had tried to seek sanctuary in against the Roukon, and how the walls had done little to stop the creatures' relentless assaults.

“We will look for Nijal,” Elysandria answered. “And if he is not there, we will continue to travel until we find him and are together again.”

Kamil nodded. That was a good answer. It was impossible to look ahead with more foresight than that without feeling a heavy weight upon his heart. They knew that the Roukon would continue to pursue them to every horizon.

“May I?” he asked. Elysandria turned and saw his hand hovering

over the baldric that carried her claymore, which was resting by her side. She nodded and he lifted the weapon.

“It is beautiful,” he said as he pulled the sword free from its leather sheath. He could see that the blade was tempered and forged in the same way as Tol's knife and Nijal's hammer. The surface was beveled with a design like that of rippling water.

“It has not seen a need for centuries,” Elysandria said. “Not since well before even Illysidyl's birth.”

Kamil looked up. “How old is she?” he asked.

“Over four hundred.”

“How old are you?”

Elysandria stared into Kamil's eyes for a long time before she answered.

“Eighty-four this spring.”

Kamil swallowed. He slipped the claymore into its sheath and handed it back to her, and she placed it on her lap. She ran her fingertips along the length of the leather as they both sat in silence together. She was avoiding his gaze, though her sidelong glances revealed that she was waiting for Kamil's reaction. Though the number came initially as a shock, the young man took a deep breath and spoke again.

“So what Illysidyl said about the Cynosure is true,” he said. Reaching into his shirt, he pulled the gemstone free and held it by its beautiful chain, which rattled like a quiet chime. The entire campsite was lit by the Cynosure's brilliance as he continued.

“This gemstone contains a shard of immortal life. You and your sisters are immortal.”

Elysandria nodded. Illysidyl had told him much, she thought to herself. She reached out and cupped the glowing stone in her hand, staring at it as though the light did not threaten to sear her eyes as it did Kamil's.

“The sky and the trees and the waters of the river birth us and we, in turn, give half of ourselves to ensure that the cycle continues,” she said in her quiet voice. “This light that you carry is the most personal and intimate gift the D'wammish could possibly give to you.”

“You give half of your life?” Kamil asked.

Elysandria smiled as she drew her hands away from the Cynosure. She continued to stare at its glow as it rested upon Kamil's chest.

“Yes, in a manner of speaking,” she said. “We are born within the Pale River as an essence. It isn't until we have given half of ourselves that we are able to take shape and walk among the trees. The half that stays within the river ensures the birth of future Sisters and we, in turn, are able to breathe the air and experience the beauty of life in all its forms.”

Kamil watched her and waited until her eyes lifted to his again before he spoke.

“Does giving half of your life mean that someday you will die?”

“No,” she said. “I will never grow old. Half of forever is still forever.”

Elysandria watched as Kamil processed everything she was telling him. She had decided that she wouldn't keep any more secrets from him, and she hoped that the young man would accept her for what she was.

“So you have no mother or father?” Kamil asked.

“Not in the sense that you do.”

“I have no mother or father either.”

Elysandria tilted her head, her nose wrinkling and her eyebrows turning down as though she were offended by the statement. Kamil lifted the Cynosure and hid it back under his shirt, casting the campsite back into firelight.

“Nijal is your father,” she admonished him.

“Well, yes, of course,” Kamil conceded, “I just meant that my real father is gone. And I never knew my mother.”

“You are lucky that you have Nijal,” Elysandria said.

She turned the baldric over on her lap and grasped the handle of the claymore, which was large enough for two hands, and then slid part of the blade free. Its shining surface reflected the orange, flickering light of the fire onto her face.

“The river is our mother,” Elysandria said, and then looked up in the sky at the glowing rings of the Pike. “The sky is our father.”

Kamil smiled as she looked up at the stars, and he began to understand why she would always stare at the Pike with such longing. He reached out and grabbed her hand, and it warmed his heart when she squeezed his fingers tightly with hers.

“Nijal can be your father too,” Kamil said.

A tear rolled down her cheek, sparkled once in the firelight, and then fell. Her lips turned up into a soft smile. With a couple of hops, she scooted close to him and they stared quietly up into the sky together.

“Of course,” Kamil said, “you’ll have to learn to clean a stable.”

She laughed, and the sudden release of emotion caused many more tears that she had been choking back to fall freely down her cheeks. She leaned against Kamil and he wrapped his arm around her. Both enjoyed the warmth of the other as the stars wheeled overhead.

Kamil started giving her some wardrobe ideas in case she should ever choose to serve Nijal's drinks to customers, with the insistence that such designs would assuredly provide her and the inn with many welcome tips. The story earned him some incredulous laughs and more than one good-natured punch in the shoulder. Eventually, he had to stop his jests and relent. She was a strong puncher.

Kamil launched into a number of tales involving some of the more colorful visitors that had frequented the inn over the years. As she listened, Elysandria began to understand the naive and inquisitive outlook on the world that he'd always seemed to have. She could tell that the travelers to the inn would often fill Kamil's head with exaggerated stories of the wide world and its many enchanting people and places.

When he spoke of his duties as Nijal's understudy and of countless 'worst day' experiences, she could almost picture herself alongside him, elbow deep in a pile of manure looking for a dandy's lost wedding ring or hanging by her ankle over the well with Nijal away for at least another seven hours. Elys imagined with a bright smile that, at the end of their journey, she would go back to the inn with Kamil. The thought of an uneventful life in a quiet countryside would be a welcome change after such a dangerous adventure.

During one story, she turned and lifted herself up to give Kamil a gentle kiss. He stumbled over his words as he returned it, and then stared at her quietly. She just smiled back and gestured for him to continue.

Eventually, she fell into slumber while listening to Kamil's voice. For one fleeting night, the threat of the Roukon was pushed aside by dreams of living peacefully in a quiet inn many, many miles away.

The sound of roaring water could be heard for miles before Nijal and the refugees caught their first glimpses of a vast waterworks. Along their entire journey, this was the first real cavern they'd encountered that seemed carved by the hands of craftsmen. They stood high atop an underground aqueduct that had long since dried up, stretching far into a deep hall of masonry and stonework.

Below them surged a fierce river of water that pounded the stone as it was directed through the cavernous room. Nijal spotted no less than three old water wheels that had once serviced machines of some sort, but the wheels had long since rotted and broken away leaving only bracketed hubs which were covered in grime.

A walkway led down into the cavern at a precarious angle, and it was stubbornly thin and difficult to walk upon. Though the glamorfolk were likely to have little trouble, Nijal was afraid that he and some of the larger shirefolk would be in danger of falling into the rushing water. It was obvious that anyone who fell would surely be unrecoverable. The water would quickly sweep them against the rock before tugging them into its dark depths.

As Basil and the Wardens began to ease people down the walkway, Nijal decided to walk along the length of the aqueduct to its abrupt end at the center of the cavern. It seemed to roughly follow along with the flow of the river below. He could literally feel the stone beneath his feet rumbling with the strength of the water as it battered the heavy pillars that kept the structure aloft.

At the far end of the waterworks there was a pinpoint of light slicing into the cavern from a small hole. A possible exit back into sunlight seemed near, and Nijal hoped that they truly had reached the end of their journey. From where he stood he could follow the length of the stairs that the refugees now descended. The path at the base twisted through the waterworks and crossed the water on many bridges that were dangerously near to the churning surface. It passed underneath where he stood, and then finally ended at a long series of wide stairs that led to a flat part of the cavern wall near to where the

sunlight was shining in.

He returned in time to help the children and Asphodel in their descent. They locked hands, ensuring that all were present, and with their backs to the wall they slowly stepped down the stairs. Nijal grimaced as he had to press his back against the stone, and his wound flared with pain that he forced himself to endure quietly. He watched the paths and bridges ahead of them as the line of refugees, glamorfolk and Wardens walked in single file with very careful steps.

When he reached the first of the bridges, Nijal insisted on carrying the children across one by one. The children were happy to accept the help, and he was thoroughly soaked by the spray of the fast-moving river by the time they were all across. This was repeated half a dozen times at each of the many bridges until finally the refugees had gathered on and around the wide stairs.

Basil and some Wardens stood at the top by the wall. Nijal shouldered his way through the crowd and met them there. Once he arrived, he joined them in staring at nothing but a plain rock face.

Basil was asking the Wardens if they'd seen any other passages, to which all were shaking their heads. Nijal hadn't either, and stared curiously at the wall. Nobody would build a series of wide stairs leading to a wall, he thought. He trudged closer, politely brushing past the commander, and placed his palms against the stone. Leaning forward, he pushed.

The wall shifted slightly with a dull sound.

Basil and the Wardens hurried to join him and there was a series of heavy grunts as everyone pushed. The wall started to give slowly, dragging across the stone an inch at a time. Before long, a square outline of sunlight was shining in along the edges of a giant block. Cheers went up behind them, bolstering everyone to push even harder. The heavy stone slab eventually lost its purchase and fell away, sliding and crunching down a set of stone stairs beyond. Sunlight bathed them.

Overhead, with its tallest spire reaching for the bright sun in the sky, loomed the grand stone fortress of Hollenguard. Basil and Nijal and the Wardens found themselves standing outside the castle and partway up a cliffside that protected its flank and served as its



southern boundary. A massive wall, lined with parapets, curved from their cliffside to another in the north. The wall was broken only by a tall gatehouse that stood over an archway and marked the castle entrance. Behind the wall were several towers topped with spires, rising up in steps and surrounding a tall, central tower.

Nijal noticed a trickle of water from the raging waterworks behind them that was seeping through cracks in the cliff to his right. It flowed down the cliff and into a wide moat that was dug before Hollenguard's wall. The trickle meant that the moat only carried a small, pathetic rivulet of a stream. He could see that there was once an archway from which the water used to flow at its full strength, but it was choked by numerous large rocks that had plunged down from the cliffs above.

Basil smiled at Nijal and stepped to the side. The Wardens followed suit and stood to the side along the stairs, allowing the refugees to exit first. Nijal noticed that each man, woman, and child that emerged from the delvings was covered in dirt, their clothing damp and tattered, and their skin bruised and scraped. Yet every one of them squinted and smiled up in the bright sunlight, their eyes filled with wonder at the sight of the tall spires of Hollenguard. They looked exhausted and relieved that their long journey through the dark of the delvings was finally at an end.

Basil and Nijal shook hands. Debo reached up and placed his hand on theirs as well. The little glamorin had a look of triumph in his eyes. It was triumph that was well-deserved.

Basil knelt and grabbed Debo's shoulders. "Thank you, my friend," he said with sincerity, "you saved my people."

Debo lifted his chin proudly and shook his head.

"No. We were all saved."

With wide grins they followed the refugees down the steps. High above them, a figure waved from atop the walls, shouting words that could not possibly be heard. As they approached the gate, a bridge that had been lifted from the moat to protect the entryway of Hollenguard began to descend with a clattering of chains. Two portcullises which guarded the interior were raised, and a host of shirefolk ran across the bridge to greet them.

Basil recognized a fellow Warden Commander among those that greeted them and he stood at attention, saluting with his fist to his chest. The woman simply grinned and bowled into him with a tight embrace that he readily returned. All around were a tide of hugs and shouts of happiness at reuniting with kinsfolk. It seemed that the fortress was already sheltering quite a few survivors.

Word quickly spread of the invaluable help of the glamorfolk, and they were happily welcomed as well. The little creatures had difficulty adjusting to the physical displays of emotion, but sooner or later most were swept up in the adulation and cheering and hugging as well. As all present began to step through the portcullises, raised voices spoke rapidly of the many dangers that had been faced while traveling the delvings.

Nijal couldn't find Asphodel in all the commotion, but he was confident she was somewhere in the throngs of people. He noticed Basil off to the side of the entryway walking with the commander who had greeted them at the gate. The two were moving quickly up a flight of stone stairs that led to the top of the high walls. Nijal broke free of the crowd and hurried to catch them.

"We have supplies for forty days," the woman was saying, "but that was before your people came."

"I am sorry," Basil replied, "but we had to discard most of our supplies to travel the delvings. They were our only road to reach Hollenguard safely."

The woman seemed to accept this, though she bit her lip with concern.

"You have more than doubled the number of the people who were here. Our supplies will not last long. This area of Denshire is sparse in the way of flora or fauna to collect for nourishment, and though the Peregrinate runs just to the south, it has not been enough to fish it during this season. The catch has done us little good."

They were halfway up the steps, turning at a switchback to go up the second half, when Nijal cleared his throat politely. Basil turned and gave him a welcome smile, then raised his arm by way of introduction.

“Nijal, this is Commander Aeriella Buckwheat.”

“Please, Basil, I told you I prefer Belle,” the commander said as she reached out and took Nijal's hand for a hearty shake.

“Pleasure to meet you, Belle,” Nijal said.

They continued up the stairs. Belle took the lead with Basil following and Nijal trailing behind. Nijal was winded when they reached the top. The stairs were certainly made for tall people. While he couldn't imagine it was easy for the shorter Wardens to make the trip, neither showed any signs of fatigue. He thought that perhaps he was just getting old.

“As I was saying, we face a severe issue of logistics,” Belle continued once they were all atop the wall. “We will have to further ration what remains, but that will only buy us time. We must think of a way to either escape this place, or fortify it with provisions.”

“Have you thought to go to Elderbrook?” Nijal asked.

Both Wardens looked towards him. Belle was shaking her head.

“Elderbrook is lost,” she said, and turned with a haunted look to Basil, “I was there.”

Basil sighed and pinched the top of his nose with his fingers. Belle and Nijal looked on as the commander thought for a long moment.

“We can send out the Wardens. Most of my men are equipped with zephyrs. We can scour the countryside for fruit and grain, and send the citizens to the river to stock up on water.”

Belle was shaking her head as he spoke. Basil fumed at the gesture and threw his arms up in defeat.

“What else is there?” he asked, angrily. “Do you wish us to brave Julithe Canyon and head north to the Silver Hills? Perhaps we can beg the Adoquin to let us take refuge with them. I am sure that will go well.”

“We can’t,” Belle said.

Basil was furious with the defeated tone that Belle had in her voice. Nijal, meanwhile, was walking slowly to the parapets and staring out west over the plains. He gripped the stone tightly, unable to speak. Belle walked to Nijal’s side and leaned against the stone next to him, and Basil’s eyes were drawn out to the horizon.

A boiling black storm, the herald of the Roukon, loomed to the west. Tendrils like dark fingers reached between the ground and the clouds. Despite the distance, Basil could see the writhing shapes of the creatures beneath it. They were on the move, consuming the land as they headed directly for Hollenguard.

“It is far too late for that,” Belle said.

All three stared silently. There was little to be said. The delvings would offer nothing in the way of refuge and would simply trap them between these Roukon and those they had escaped. It would be impossible for them to make it to Julithe Canyon on foot with the Roukon so close, so escape to the north was impossible.

“They are closing fast,” Nijal said.

Belle nodded. “For a while, they simply milled about at the horizon. They seemed directionless. But when the sun rose this morning we could see them advancing steadily. Perhaps they are finally aware of our presence here.”

Basil slammed his gauntleted fist into the gatehouse wall and then stepped to the inner edge to shout down at the Wardens below.

“Raise the bridge!” He ordered. “Close the gates!”

Men and women rushed to do so. The gatehouse beside them clattered with the sound of the falling portcullises and the winding chain that slowly began to raise the bridge. Nijal squinted into the distance.

“No,” he said, and then shouted, “No!”

He ran to the edge beside Basil and shouted down.

“No!” Nijal cried, “Lower the bridge! Open the gates!”

“Nijal, what are you doing?” Basil shouted, but Nijal was already flying down the stairs.

Basil and Belle heard him shouting. They stepped to the edge of the wall and peered westward to discover what he had seen. At the head of the horde, standing out amidst the blackness, were three figures.

“Horses,” Belle said.

“And a cliffjumper,” Basil acknowledged.

Nijal reached the bottom and his shouts were finally heard over the ratcheting of the gate and bridge mechanisms. At his insistence they were quickly reversed, and many Wardens joined in to haul the portcullises back up. While gravity took care of things when the gates were being lowered, it took manpower when they needed to be raised.

As the gates opened, Basil was shouting orders. He had reached the bottom with Belle. Nijal stepped over to the bridge mechanism and kicked the lock free to send the bridge, which was already halfway up, careening back down with a dull thud.

“Wardens!” Basil shouted. “Zephyrs ready! On me!”

Nijal was ahead of them all, rolling under the gate and then crouching under the second before sprinting along the bridge. He judged the distance between the riders and himself to be less than a mile, which left him little time to act. He charged back towards the delvings, hefting his hammer and ignoring the pain of the wound in his back.

Basil watched him go but had little time to question why. He led his Wardens across the bridge and lined them up to the left and the right. They raised their zephyrs and stared down the weapons at the approaching Roukon horde.

Meanwhile, Nijal was taking the steps leading back into the delvings two by two. He reached the top, his thighs burning with the

strain of his climb, and lifted his hammer high. With a roar, he swung the weapon. It connected with a crushing sound against the rocks that had fallen to choke off the water. Some rocks shifted beneath his blow, little ones were jarred loose with a rolling clatter, but the landslide remained unmoved.

“Steady,” Basil was saying. The riders were closing in with the Roukon directly behind them.

Nijal lifted his hammer and roared again as he swung it around. He heard a cracking sound when it connected. Another leak sprung to join the original, but it was still a small stream of water. He gasped for air and brought the hammer back to his shoulder.

“Fighting withdrawal,” Basil was commanding. The Wardens formed into two lines, one ahead of the other.

Nijal swung the hammer again, shouting angrily at the cliffside as if the very power of his frustration would bring it down. His hammer struck hard and a large chunk of rock shattered into smaller bits, causing a gush of water to spray outward around the weapon. As he pulled it back, he heard the rolling and cracking of stone as many of the rocks began to fall, giving way to even more water. Soon, the power of the surging river that had long been trapped within the cliff sundered what remained of the rockslide, sending the raging fury of the waterworks down into the moat.

Basil looked over his shoulder in surprise as headwaters rushed along the moat and towards the bridge. The Wardens dutifully ignored the tumultuous sound and stared down their weapons as the riders and the great horde that followed drew ever closer.

Nijal rushed down the stairs. He looked up in time to see the riders pass the Wardens and Basil and cross the bridge. The horse's hoofs thundered and the cliffjumper's head was low to the ground as it ran.

“First line, fire!” Basil commanded. The zephyrs burst in unison and slammed into the leading edge of the Roukon. A second row of Wardens stepped forward as the first stepped back and made for the bridge while they reloaded.

“Second line, fire!” Basil shouted. A second wave of zephyr fire cut a swath into the Roukon, who were already faltering from the impact of the first.

“Withdraw! Withdraw!”

The remaining Wardens made a break for the bridge. The first group, having reloaded during their retreat, paused halfway across and pivoted to fire. Basil called a halt to their actions.

“To the left! Cover!”

Nijal was sprinting for the bridge. The Roukon had been driven back around it by the waves of zephyr fire, but were still closing on him faster than he knew he could reach it. He raised his hammer as he ran, intending to crush the malformed skull of the nearest beast, which was well over twice his height.

The Roukon fell to the side violently as a series of zephyr blasts knocked it off balance, and Nijal realized that the Wardens upon the bridge were covering his return. The ground between him and safety, ever dwindling with every one of his steps, was clear.

“Inside! Inside!” Nijal was shouting. Already, the surging water was pounding under the bridge, with waves bursting against the side and over it and threatening to sweep the Wardens away. Nijal saw Basil call for the retreat, and the Wardens quickly disappeared under the archway.

Basil turned around once he had passed beneath the first portcullis. Near him was a wooden wheel that was locked in position and keeping the gate up. He watched as Nijal ran, impossibly outpacing the great horde that nipped at his heels. Waves of water were crashing against the bridge and being thrown up all around him, and yet his footing never faltered. When he was halfway, Basil pivoted and kicked the lock of the gate mechanism so hard that it shattered.

Nijal saw the gate descending. The Wardens were crouched just beyond it, zephyrs aimed right at him. He gripped his hammer tightly, raised it over his head, and launched himself forward at the ground. He felt the blasts of the weapons as they sliced the air just over his head. He heard the roars of the Roukon as the Warden's aim caused

them to falter and the loud splashes as many staggered into the moat. He heard the great, reverberating crash of the portcullis as it slammed down just behind him.

Basil lifted Nijal to his feet and they retreated with the Wardens beyond the second gate. The lock was released and that gate came crashing down as well. Wardens lined up and fired their zephyrs at any Roukon brave enough to attempt the crossing of the bridge.

When the Roukon had been driven back and the surge of the water had died down, a group Wardens began to heave at the wheel. Nijal caught his breath as he watched the bridge rise up and up, finally securing the only entrance to Hollenguard. He turned to Basil and lifted a hand to give the man his undying thanks for saving him. Basil smiled and reached out his hand as well.

They never got the opportunity. Instead, Nijal was mauled by Kamil, who threw his arms around the innkeeper's waist in a tight bear hug. Knocked off balance, Nijal was soon borne to the ground as Elysandria leapt up and caught him around his shoulders. He ignored the pain of the wound in his back and of the stony turf as it met his backside, hugging the young ones back with all of his strength.



Hollenguard held fast against the swarm. The fast-flowing moat prevented the beasts from crossing to challenge the walls. Those that ventured too close to the moat were repelled with zephyr blasts from the Wardens who patrolled the parapets. Still, despite their being foiled at every turn, the Roukon did not leave.

Kesrin and Kitarin found their father and younger sisters and quickly introduced them to their friends. Kamil was thrilled beyond words that everyone had made it, even if it was a small comfort to hold on to amidst the bleakness of their limited safety. Everyone knew that eventually the Roukon would find a way to breach the walls or that their supplies would simply run out.

The grounds of Hollenguard were searched thoroughly. It turned out to be a blessing that the walls still stood as sturdy as they did, for much of the interior of the fortress was crumbling and in ill-repair. The high cliff walls that made up the northern and southern boundaries of the castle funneled eastward away from the entrance to a high overlook from which one could gaze out over the veil. A block of stone stood about twenty feet high at the center of the overlook which had a stairway carved into the side for access to the top.

Kamil, Nijal, Elysandria, Kesrin and Kitarin sat upon the wide, flat top of the block. There was a circular depression as wide as Kamil was tall in the center, and Kesrin speculated that it had once held a ballista or similar weapon to fend off any ships that might attempt to assault the fortress from the veil side. Nijal agreed with him.

An entire evening was spent atop the stone block with the telling of tales. Bottles of wine gifted by the D'wammish were passed around and sipped from gingerly. They were all aware of the lack of provisions, but were in a celebratory mood at having been reunited.

Kitarin and Elys spoke of the old academy in the bog and of their capture by the Empress, a great serpent that glistened with green scales. At everyone's urging she revealed the lyre that she had recovered and began to play it. Her brother accompanied her on his

flute, and for over an hour the others sat enraptured by the melodies that the twins produced. They were so talented that it was hard to fathom why they had chosen the life of Wardens over that of composers.

When Kamil explained how he had survived the Roukon attack, Nijal was apologetic that he hadn't been able to find him. He vividly remembered having been awakened that horrible morning by Kamil's cries of his name, and the older man was choked up with the memory of having left the hill without him. Kamil gave the big man a hug and assured him that he was confident that everything had happened the way it should have. Kesrin even mentioned that he wouldn't have escaped had not the desire to spirit Kamil free from there urged him to try.

When Kamil revealed the Cynosure, Nijal asked to see it. He lifted it over his head and passed it across to Nijal. The chain was so light and so thin that it slipped like sand through Nijal's fingers and he almost lost his grip on it completely.

"Be careful," Elysandria cautioned. She was reaching out as if to snatch the gemstone should it fall. "You cannot imagine the power that would be released should that gem be chipped or shattered. It contains the very essence of life. Not just any life, but a life forever burning."

Nijal nodded. The light shone so brightly that, from the western walls of Hollenguard and to the people in the grounds below, it resembled a powerful lighthouse beacon. The light was not constant, but rather shimmered as though it was alive and dancing.

Nijal passed the Cynosure back to Kamil, who slipped it beneath his shirt. The older man then launched into his tale of the trials they had faced beneath Valice and Denshire in the dark, snaking halls of the delvings. He glossed over the events in the cavern with the insects which had injured him with their sharp pincers, not wanting the others to worry about the wound on his back that still burned painfully. When he spoke of the crystal cavern and of the way in which the glamorfolk had saved them, Kamil and Elysandria smiled. They were happy to hear that Debo was with them.

The tales drained away most of the night as well as three bottles of wine in their telling, and as the sun rose over the mists of the veil,

everyone was fast asleep.

Provisions were rationed as best as could be managed. The glamorfolk were light eaters, and with some careful deliberation in stretching out the food, the refugees lasted well over three weeks behind Hollenguard's walls. Culverts had been uncovered at the base of the wall to either side of the gatehouse which allowed access to the moat for water. However, as the days wore on into the fourth week of the Roukon siege, stomachs began to complain. It wouldn't be long before all of their food was exhausted.

Kesrin and Kamil were standing atop the parapets and staring out over the Roukon swarm. The creatures still milled about below, but had long since stopped attempting to cross the fast-flowing moat. Kesrin held a borrowed zephyr and lazily rested it upon the wall as he kept watch.

"They are never going to leave," he commented with a derisive sniff. "They can smell us in here."

Kamil leaned against the gatehouse and glanced out over the wall. Though the horde had thinned, there were still plenty enough to prevent any escape. He knew that even with the many zephyrs that the Wardens possessed, the Roukon were far too many in number for them to handle.

The young man had his dragon tucked inside his belt. He kept it loaded and at half-cock every day of the Roukon siege, requiring only a quick priming of the flashpan and a drawing back of the hammer for it to be ready to fire. The bag full of lead ammunition at his hip rattled whenever he moved.

"At least we're all together," Kamil said.

Kesrin glanced over his shoulder at his friend, whose words were little comfort for the Warden. It would be best if they were all together and somewhere else, he thought to say. Optimism was infuriating to him in such dire situations, but he didn't let on about his feelings. Instead, he nodded and returned to looking out over the swarm.

Below them, beside one of the culverts in the wall, Kitarin was

sitting with Elysandria. At the D'wammish woman's request, Kitarin had borrowed a brush from a young shire lady and was helping tend to her hair.

"Here's a few more," Kitarin said. Elysandria turned around and saw strands of black hair pinched between the Wardens fingers. She sighed.

"It is growing deep into winter," she said.

"Will it get worse?" Kitarin asked.

Elys nodded. She lifted her hands and ran her fingers through the long strands of her hair that were lying over her shoulder.

"I will lose it all until the spring flowers begin to bloom."

Kitarin nodded in understanding and passed the brush through her hair again and again. Every time, more strands of hair came free. Though Elysandria was gradually losing it, her hair still appeared to be very thick.

"It will be awhile at this rate before it is all gone," Kitarin said. In a wry voice, she continued, "Perhaps we will all be dead from starvation before you lose the last of it."

"Kit!" Elys said. She turned to her friend with an admonishing stare. "We are going to get through this."

Kitarin smiled, but she didn't believe her. The Warden stopped brushing and placed her hands in her lap. Elysandria turned around and sat across from her. She was still fussing with her hair nervously.

"Do you think he will still find me beautiful when it's all gone?" Elys asked in a quiet voice.

"Who?" Kitarin asked innocently.

Elysandria swatted Kitarin's knee. Both girls laughed as Elys gathered up her hair and swept it back behind her.

Near the two women, in the lowest floor of the northernmost tower that surrounded the central spire of Hollenguard, the children that Asphodel watched over sat in a circle upon the stone floor. Nijal had found them small, dull pieces of stone which served well as makeshift chalk, and all of the children were busy scraping away with the stone and creating designs from their imaginations.

Some drew pictures of home, of the sun, of lush fields and of tall trees. Others drew images that continued to haunt them from the delvings, such as the giant insects that had attacked them as they passed beneath the chimneys or the tall room of beautiful crystal whose walls they had been carried up by the Wardens.

The little girl who owed Nijal her life strayed from the group, slowly walking up the winding stairway that led to the very top of the tower. She passed windows and would boost herself up to gaze out. Sometimes she looked west over the dark, storm-ridden plains of Denshire and the sea of Roukon, other times she looked east out over the expanse of the veil and the blue sky that gleamed overhead.

She heard quiet whispers and got up on her tiptoes, sneaking like a cat until she rounded the last corner. She saw her teacher, Asphodel, in the strong arms of Nijal. The two had their foreheads pressed together and were speaking quietly to one another. The little girl could see that Asphodel was crying and could hear Nijal speaking words of comfort. As she watched from the shadows of the stairs, she saw their lips touch.

In the sky to the west of Hollenguard there appeared a large figure with wide wings. Kamil saw it first and quickly pointed it out to Kesrin, who raised his zephyr defensively. It swooped beneath the dark clouds and over the Roukon, who roared incessantly in their guttural, stony growls. As the figure neared, they both recognized her.

The Empress soared over the walls and alighted in the courtyard, and Kamil hurried down to meet her. As he descended the stairs he saw that Illysidyl was being helped from a saddle on her back by Basil. The woman set down a long pack that had been slung across her shoulders, and was unraveling and presenting it when Kamil arrived.

Beneath blankets of fine leather were dozens of spearheads, each shining brilliantly in the sunlight and bearing the unmistakable designs that marked them as D'wammish weapons.

Basil accepted the weapons with a bow of thankful reverence. Illysidyl then called for assistance and Wardens stepped forward to help remove packs from harnesses all along the Empress' sides. Each was filled with waybread and salted meats. It was a welcome addition to Hollenguard's dwindling stores.

Elys arrived and hurried forward to hug her sister. The Empress, seeking attention, snaked her big head around and under Illysidyl's palm. She rubbed the serpent's snout affectionately.

"The Roukon have breached the Pale River," Illysidyl said. "The D'wammish have been forced to retreat."

A collective gasp rose up from the shirefolk that had gathered. The very thought that their matrons would be driven from their home was unfathomable to many of them and the thin thread of hope that remained in their hearts was frayed a little more.

"I am sorry for what little help I bring," the Pale Sister continued, "I was not even sure that the defenses of Hollenguard would have held out this long."

"They have held strong, my lady," Basil reported. "Our biggest concern now is food."

Illysidyl shook her head.

"You have not seen what I have seen," she said. "The Roukon are climbing the cliffs that surround the fortress. They grow dangerously close to the summit. Should they find a way to breach it, they will be able to descend within the walls and take you."

Nijal had arrived at that time with Asphodel close behind. Basil set the spearheads upon the ground and stared around him at the growing throngs of Denshire refugees, Wardens, and glamorfolk.

"Commander," Nijal said. "Give me two dozen Warden's staves and a few strong arms."

Basil nodded. A few men volunteered without him having to say a word. Basil turned to the innkeeper with an inquisitive look. Around

them, many Wardens were passing their staves forward. Illysidyl smiled.

“I intend to put these spearheads to use,” Nijal said. “If the Roukon are coming, than we shall be equipped to defend ourselves.

Nijal and his assistants had many spears fashioned in short order. The D'wammish spearheads were brilliantly crafted with a vice upon the stock that could easily be hammered into place over the end of a staff. The glamorfolk would then assist in the securing of the spearheads through the use of rope and various sundries that they gathered. Before long, many of Hollenguard's defenders were armed with weapons that would be able to pierce the skin of the Roukon.

Those unable to fight were gathered into the lower floors of the towers. The courtyard was left bare in the event that Illysidyl's dire prediction of a breach over the cliffs became true. The Wardens paced the walls and watched the horde for any designs they might have in assaulting the fortress.

Illysidyl did not leave after she had dropped off the supplies, but rather she volunteered to fly over the fortress on the Empress' back to scout. She continued to observe that the Roukon were navigating the cliffs, often losing their footing and falling but never relenting in their rabid hunger for the lives within Hollenguard. She feared more and more that an infiltration of the fortress was inevitable.

At Basil's urging, Debo and the glamorfolk scoured the grounds for an escape route. It stood to reason that with the delvings stretching all the way here, there might still be some means of escape. If all roads led to Hollenguard, then perhaps there was a hidden road that they could take to freedom.

Debo scampered up each tower, and even to the very top of the middle spire. The view from there was dizzying to him as he gazed out over the destruction to the west and the endlessness of the veil to the east. Despite his efforts, there was nothing of interest to be found. The interior of the fortress was stark and empty.

One morning, just as the sun was rising over the veil in the east, the little glamorin was prowling the grounds of the fortress when he noticed an odd pile of stones lying against the stone block that stood at the veil overlook. Debo had passed the pile many times, but



something about it seemed odd to him this time. He realized that the rocks could only have been deliberately stacked there, as they were too far from the walls and in too neat a pile to have been deposited by a landslide. He squatted and lifted and pulled and tugged until enough of the rock was set aside to see that there was an opening he could squeeze through.

When he did so, he found himself inside a square shaft hewn out of the stone that plunged downward into darkness. At the center of the shaft were two chains connected to a wheel which reminded him of the lifts of Glimmerden. A steep stairway was carved into the sides of the shaft that allowed him to carefully descend for several revolutions until he reached an archway bathed in natural light.

As Debo passed beneath the archway, he entered a tall, hollow structure that opened out at its far end onto the veil. At his feet and swirling about his ankles was a layer of cool, swirling mist that tickled his skin. He looked up, so high that he had to lean backwards, and his eyes went wide.

Up on the fortress grounds, Warden Commanders Belle and Basil were discussing a rotation of the guard. Debo and seven of his kin scampered up to them frantically. Debo was out of breath.

“Commander, come quickly!” he said.

“What is it?” Basil asked.

“You have to see!”

Basil started to walk after him, but Debo shook his head and looked around him. He pointed a long finger at several Wardens nearby.

“You, and you, and you, and you, come too.” the little creature commanded.

Basil shot a glance at Belle, who shrugged. Both commanders felt a little bit of hope in their hearts as they ran after the glamorfolk with the four Wardens that Debo had chosen hurrying behind them. Debo bounded to the rear of the fortress and then hopped up on a pile of rock that lay against the block of stone at the rear.

“In here,” Debo said, and with a bit of wriggling he disappeared from sight.

The Wardens bent and heaved the rock away. Basil surmised that it must have been piled there deliberately, and the light of hope grew brighter within him as he commanded his Wardens to hurry. Soon, enough rocks were free that everyone could pass through.

It turned out that the stone block had been built neither as a lookout nor as housing for a weapon of defense, but rather as a means to descend downward to a vast, natural cavern. The tides of the veil swirled along the floor, growing ever deeper at the furthest end, which was open to the sunrise. Nearby, a scaffolding of wood was built into the wall that rose up many flights of stairs to a gangway. Planks and ropes stretched from the gangway to a sight that took the Wardens’ breath away.

Elysandria was walking with Nijal when she saw Belle running through the courtyard and speaking rapidly to each of the Wardens, who were then hurrying to the eastern edge of the fortress. The Pale Sister followed the crowds and found them gathering around the place atop which she and her friends had spent their first night in Hollenguard and shared wine and stories with one another.

“What is it?” Nijal asked as he arrived behind her.

Elys shook her head and shrugged before she moved briskly to the doorway. She ducked under it and stepped inside, and then picked careful steps down the steep, twisting stairs until she joined a group of Wardens and glamorfolk who stood together in the cavern below, all staring upward.

Above her, resting upon the wooden slats of a launch and listing slightly to the side, was a veilrunner.

“A ship!” Elysandria cried. Basil turned at the sound of her voice, but she was already rushing past him and up the steps to the gangway. Nijal and Basil followed, shouting her name, but she ignored them as she raced onto the deck.

She had to catch her balance when she arrived. Though the ship

rested upon a launch as though it had been built here but never sent to sea, it was listing heavily. It had looked like only a minor tilt from below, but now that she was on the ship she had to struggle with the way that everything was being pulled to the side.

Nijal could only stare as he walked along the gangplank after her. The ship looked sound and well worthy. The wood was strong and the hull was thick and unbroken. High above, he could see that sturdy sails were wrapped tightly about the cross masts, ready to be unfurled and catch the wind.

Elysandria spun around excitedly from the deck. "Nijal, it's a ship!" she said. She hurried through an aft door and down into the lower decks.

Nijal moved to follow her. Basil and the Wardens were gathering on the gangway, staring in awe. The innkeeper had to clutch the railing tightly as he made his way to the doorway that Elys had taken. Something about the way that the ship was heavily listing gave him cause for concern.

Though the sun shone in from the veil side of the cavern, it became dark and gloomy in the lower decks. Nijal could see lanterns on iron hooks equipped with fresh candles that had never been lit, all hanging at an awkward angle because of the way the ship was resting upon its launch. He descended the stairs until he reached the lowest deck. Where one would expect a bright light in the darkness, there was none.

Nijal's concerns were realized when he saw that the reservoir, a large glass gem at the center of the lowest deck, was black and lifeless. A veilrunner was only seaworthy if the reservoir was lit, and such technology was far beyond him. They had a ship, true, but it would not be able to float upon the veil and carry them free of their plight.

Elysandria just stood there, staring. He walked up behind her and put his hand upon her shoulder. He hated to see her hopes so quickly dashed.

"Lass..." he began in an apologetic tone.

Elysandria spun. Her face was bright with hope, her dark eyes

sparkling even in the dim recesses of the ship. Nijal was taken aback.

“We need to get everyone aboard!” Elysandria said.

“Lass, the reservoir is dead. The ship will not bear us upon the mists.”

Elysandria shook her head quickly. “Yes it will, Nijal,” she insisted, “we have the means. You have to help me.”

She charged out of the reservoir room, and Nijal hurried up the steps after her until they both reached the deck. He called out for her to stop as she ran for the gangway and she turned impatiently back to him.

“Help you do what?” he asked.

“Help me find Kamil!”

Kamil had just left Kesrin and his sister atop the walls. They had been rotated in and were taking the morning watch, and Kamil liked to walk with them to their posts. As he stepped off the stairs he felt a rush of wind from above. The dark, looming shape of the Empress swooped down into the courtyard, and Illysidyl quickly leapt off of her back.

“They are coming!” Illysidyl shouted.

“The Roukon?”

Illysidyl pointed up. Kamil followed her finger to the northern cliff and saw dark shapes against the bright blue sky. He felt his stomach drop as he looked back at Illysidyl. She seemed to be waiting for him to say something.

“What do we do?” he asked.

Before she could answer him, he saw a group of Wardens running through the courtyard and towards the towers. Belle was at the lead, so Kamil held up his hand to Illysidyl before hurrying to head the commander off.

“Commander,” he shouted. “We are under attack!”

Belle followed his gesturing arm to the north with her eyes and her face grew pale. She quickly turned a determined gaze back to him and grabbed his shoulders.

“Kamil, help me gather everyone,” she said.

He had to grab her by the arm before could she turn to move away.

“Wait,” Kamil said. “Gather them for what?”

“There is a ship!” Belle explained.

High above them the Roukon began to leap from the cliff tops. Their dark, misshapen forms were like falling inkblots. The sight struck Kamil’s heart with terror.

“Kes and Kit are on the walls,” he called, but Belle was already gone and was busy forming the Wardens into ranks. A line of Wardens set their D’wammish spears against their heels, and second line formed behind them with zephyrs at the ready.

“Illysidyl, help me warn those on the walls!” Kamil said.

The Pale Sister nodded and quickly mounted the Empress again. She flew to the south section of the wall to warn those that patrolled there, and Kamil stared up at the north section and bit his lip. Kesrin and Kitarin were up there. He had to tell them what was happening.

He drew his dragon as he ran for the stairs. Faintly, he heard the sound of his name being called as he ascended, and finally acknowledged it at the switchback while he was turning to go up the second flight.

“Kamil!” came a familiar voice. It was Nijal.

Kamil leaned over and stared down at his mentor. “I’ll be right down!” the young man assured him. “I have to get Kes and Kit!”

“Kamil!” Nijal shouted, “There is a ship, but the reservoir is dead!”

Kamil didn’t think he heard him correctly. He leaned down and put his hand to his ear.

“There is a ship, but the reservoir is dead!” Nijal repeated, “Elysandria says we need to find you!”

The words that Illysidyl had spoken at the Pale River came rushing back to him. He reached behind his neck and unlatched the chain that held the Cynosure. It glittered brightly as he raised his arm out over the edge and let it go.

Nijal saw the bright light falling towards him. He cupped his hands and moved quickly to catch it. Before he could fathom why his boy would do such a thing, Kamil was already off and racing up the stairs again.

Zephyrs burst from behind Nijal and he turned in time to see the first of the Roukon stumbling backwards from the blasts. The lead Wardens lifted their spears and advanced while the back row reloaded.

“Nijal, get to the ship!” Basil shouted. Nijal nodded and slipped the Cynosure around his neck. He was halfway across the courtyard, passing Basil and a group of Wardens who were moving to reinforce the line, when he realized something.

“Asphodel.”

Nijal broke stride and sprinted for one of the towers.

Up on the wall, Kesrin fired his zephyr at one of the Roukon as it descended through the air, sending it end over end and slamming with a crunch of stone against the northern cliff. Kitarin, armed with a spear, was backing up towards the stairs. She noticed Kamil approaching them and shouted his name, and Kesrin glanced over his shoulder and nodded to him as he reloaded.

“We need to retreat,” Kamil said to them. “There is a ship.”

Kesrin indicated that he understood. Roukon continued to descend from the cliff and many landed upon the wall. The creatures advanced in a rage while Kesrin lifted his weapon and fired. He retreated behind his sister, who brandished her spear and advanced. The leading creature met her weapon and roared in surprise and agony before it pitched off the side of the wall. She was barely able to pull the spear free before she lost it.

“Sis!” Kesrin shouted as he snapped his Zephyr back. Kitarin ducked away and he raised the weapon and fired again. Two more of the creatures, disoriented by the blast, lost their footing and fell. They were replaced by many more Roukon who were landing upon the wall and stalking ever closer.

Kamil glanced down at the courtyard. He could see that the Wardens were fighting a losing battle and were being forced backward before the vast numbers of the enemy.

“We have to go!” he shouted.

Kamil led the way down the stairs. Kesrin followed, reloading his weapon, while his sister covered the rear. Another Roukon closed the distance from above them and its long arms swept at Kit's face. She managed to jerk away and lifted her spear to thrust. Her weapon struck the creature's dark flesh with a flash and caused it to pitch over the side of the stairs, but she was unable to pull the spear free in time and felt the shaft snap in her hands. Kitarin was left holding nothing but the broken half of a staff.

The Roukon took the opportunity to advance on the unarmed woman, but Kamil lifted his dragon and fired and the thundering blast drove them back. When they had reached the base of the stairs they met Basil, who was commanding the Wardens in a fighting retreat. The courtyard was strewn with Roukon corpses.

Kamil put his back to the wall and reached into his ammunition pouch to reload his weapon. Illysidyl arrived after having accomplished her task in warning the Wardens that had manned the south part of the wall. Those defenders who were not on the front lines were gathering the refugees and directing them through the courtyard to the east.

“Kamil!” he heard Kesrin shout.

Kamil finished loading his weapon and looked up in time to see the Warden line routed. The sheer number of Roukon attackers had overwhelmed the defenders. He saw Basil disappear amidst writhing claws and menacing snarls. Those Wardens that had managed to avoid the onslaught were running for their lives.

“Run!” Kitarin shouted, and grabbed his arm as she hurried past.

Kamil ran. All around him there were men and women running as well. Wardens and refugees alike were racing towards rear of the fortress grounds and the promised safety of the ship. To both sides he caught sight of people being felled mid-stride by pouncing shadows,



and he gritted his teeth for that moment when he would be struck.

The Empress swooped down from the sky, squealing in a furious rage. Illysidyl soared upon the serpent's back, her flowing white dress a bright beacon in the growing darkness of the assault. Sharp talons tore through the Roukon lines, causing them to scatter. The Empress gripped two of the beasts and lifted them skyward, then dropped them over the wall and into the moat beyond.

As the Empress struck, Debo and the glamorfolk launched a counterattack. D'wammish spears were flung into the ranks of the Roukon pursuers, felling many of them as the strength of the forged metal sliced into their dark skin in a series of bright flashes. The Roukon attacks faltered, and the fleeing refugees and what was left of their Warden defenders felt a surge of hope that quickened their steps. The stone block that led downward to the hidden harbor of the ship grew closer and closer.

Kamil saw Elysandria, then. While men and women fled past her, she advanced against the tide and into the courtyard. Her claymore was gripped in two pale hands, her dark hair tied back in a tail. Kamil tried to halt, but the crowd continued pushing him forward. He had to fight the surge.

"Elys!" he called, fighting to shoulder his way free.

Elysandria heard him, but she continued to advance. Two of the leading Roukon approached her and she planted her feet, watching them carefully. When they pounced, she pivoted and her sword arced through the air. The blade sliced effortlessly through the beasts and they collapsed to the ground, dead.

Many more of the Roukon were gathering before her, but Elysandria stood her ground. She gripped her claymore tightly in two pale hands and waved the blade back and forth as if daring another creature to approach.

"Kamil!" Kesrin shouted. Kamil was jarred from the sight of Elysandria's standoff with the Roukon as Kitarin was thrust into his arms. "Get my sister out of here."

Kitarin was struggling against Kamil's grip, shouting after Kesrin

as her brother walked back into the courtyard. Kamil had to fight with every ounce of his strength to keep the unarmed woman from going out there after him.

Zephyrs snapped into the ready position as Kesrin advanced from behind Elysandria flanked by a few brave Wardens. The Roukon attacked, and what beasts Elysandria could not handle alone, the Wardens kept back with focused fire. A large clearing was made around the entrance of the stone building, securing the safety of the remaining refugees as one by one they filed through the entrance and fled down the stairs towards the ship.

A great Roukon beast reared up from the pack, and smaller creatures quickly scattered as though they were afraid to get in its way. It resembled a feral predator; catlike, but with an abnormally long torso and hind legs that were bent at strange angles. It lowered its head and roared a mighty roar which caused the ground and the spires of Hollenguard to tremble.

Kesrin and the Wardens aimed and fired. The Zephyr blasts struck the beast and caused it to falter, but it managed to channel its rage and charge. Nearly three times her size, the beast bore down upon Elysandria.

Kamil let go of Kitarin and lifted his dragon. Aiming carefully, he lined up a shot and pulled the trigger. The lead ball hit the Roukon squarely and it jerked its head violently to the side. Elysandria took advantage of the distraction to tumble sideways, and as she knelt and the beast roared by her she swung her claymore up through its body. The mighty roar tapered off into nothing, and the Roukon collapsed with a thud and lay motionless with its jaws locked wide open.

“Elys, are you alright?” Kamil asked.

She saw his hand reaching down for her, and nodded before accepting his help to get back to her feet. Nearby, Kesrin was shouting angrily at the Roukon as he tried to load his zephyr again. It took the efforts of Kitarin and three Wardens to drag him back towards the ship.

“Kamil,” Elysandria said, out of breath, “you have to get to the ship. We need the Cynosure to bring the reservoir to life.”

The Roukon again began to slowly advance around them.

“Nijal has it,” Kamil said.

Nijal was in the base of one of the towers gathering the children with Asphodel. He instructed them all to hold hands and form a chain and the children followed his instructions readily. The little girl he had saved insisted on being in the front so that she could hold his, and he relented.

As he led the way towards the tower exit it burst inward on its hinges. The children screamed as a slithering Roukon slipped into the tower and rose up like a cobra ready to strike. Nijal lifted his hammer.

The Roukon was quicker. It struck hard, swatting him across the room, and he stumbled and fell against the wall. His hammer swung end over end and slammed against a different wall. The children scattered. As Nijal fought to regain his senses, he saw the beast rising up again through blurry eyes. It tracked a little boy who was running frantically for the stairs.

“Hey!” Nijal shouted at the creature, hopping to his feet. The Cynosure tumbled out from beneath his shirt and began to glow brightly.

The sudden bright light stunned the Roukon, who hissed and shied away as though it was a raging fire and the creature was afraid of being burned. Nijal grasped the gemstone and tugged, breaking the chain and pulling it free from around his neck. He held the Cynosure aloft and the creature continued to be repelled.

“Asphodel, get the children behind me,” he instructed.

She obliged him, and once the children were gathered he slowly circled around the room towards the door. The long, slithering Roukon hissed and hid its eyes from the brilliant light, allowing them to reach the door.

“Get out,” he said.

Asphodel shooed the children out the door. Nijal stood at the center of the room and held the creature back. She took one last look at him and then fled, leading the children in a chain towards the ship.

Nijal slowly backed away. The creature flicked its shadowy tail menacingly back and forth, fighting to brave the glow and attack him. Just as he was about to pass under the arch of the doorway, it struck.

The Roukon did not choose him as a target. Instead, it slammed its bulk into the wall of the tower above him. Stone archways, serving as rafters, cracked and began collapsing down. One twisted and pinned his leg while another struck his shoulder. He stared at the Cynosure as it bounced and rolled away from him until another piece of the ceiling crashed down upon it.

The room exploded in a brilliant ball of light.

Outside, the last of the refugees including Asphodel and the children raced for the harbor and safety. The courtyard was still, with countless bodies of both the Roukon and their victims scattered about. The front line of the swarm advanced cautiously upon the few defenders who remained to guard the retreat to the ship.

Kamil and Elys slowly backed away from the circle of Roukon that was closing around them. They could hear Kesrin's labored shouts as his sister and fellow Wardens forcibly bore him away. Elysandria lifted her claymore and gripped it tightly with both hands. It seemed that the weapon would slice into more Roukon flesh before they could make it to safety.

With a loud clap of thunder an explosion rocked the towers of Hollenguard. The ground quaked, and all of the windows of the towers were lit by brilliant, white beams.

A globe of light began to spread outward. The nearest Roukon attempted to scatter, but the light caught and consumed them. Their bodies disintegrated as the power of the immortal life that had been unleashed from the Cynosure consumed the unlife of every Roukon it touched. As the globe spread, it began to fade, and finally it became nothing but wisps of energy that retreated upwards into the sky. Clearings appeared in the dark clouds overhead wherever the fleeting wisps of light touched them.

Elysandria knew immediately that the Cynosure had been lost and her heart broke in her chest. The last hope she'd had of leaving this place, of her life with Kamil and Nijal in a quiet inn in the countryside, had flittered away like the wispy remnants of the shattered stone.

All of the Roukon in the courtyard of Hollenguard had been destroyed by the Cynosure's light, but there were still many others pouring over the cliffs and the walls. They continued to advance ravenously towards the remaining defenders.

"We have to go," Elysandria said.

She turned and ran into the stone harbor. Kamil moved to follow, but something caught his eye. Stumbling from the nearest tower, heavily bloodied and blinking his eyes rapidly, was Nijal.

Kamil shouted after Elysandria to wait, but she did not hear him. He raced to Nijal's side and threw the older man's arm over his shoulder, then helped him back towards the entrance that led down into the harbor. Kamil noticed the way his mentor was limping and the confusion and fear in his vacant, unfocused eyes.

They carefully descended the stairway, hearing the sounds of the prowling Roukon growing more and more distant above them. Nijal did his best not to burden his boy, but with his wounds the steep stairs were difficult to negotiate.

Belle and a handful of Wardens were waiting at the bottom, and a look of relief washed over the commander's face when she saw that Nijal and Kamil were safe. Two of her Wardens stepped forward, and Kamil handed off the burden of carrying the older man to them.

"We are the last," Kamil said to Belle. "The Roukon are close behind us."

Commander Belle nodded and Kamil hurried to climb the gangway that led to the ship. He passed many faces that he was glad to see. Though Basil had fallen along with at least a dozen Wardens, a good number of refugees and nearly all of the glamorfolk had survived the battle. They milled around on the deck, catching their breaths and searching for loved ones. Wardens were lining up to defend the ship.

“Elysandria!” he called.

He saw Kesrin and Kitarin standing nearby with their father and sisters. Kitarin approached him and gave him a brief hug.

“She is below,” Kitarin said.

Kamil thanked the Warden and made his way down through the decks of the ship, calling Elysandria's name as he went. He finally found her on the lowest deck. She stood before the lifeless glass gem that awaited the light of a Cynosure to bear the ship away upon the great expanse of the veil.

“Elys.”

He heard her lightly sobbing. The darkness of the gem was all that he needed to see to confirm his fears. The ship would not float upon the mists, and the Roukon would soon find them here and finish them. He stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She placed her hands upon his and leaned back into him.

“Don't cry, Elys,” he said to her. “I've got you.”

She turned to face him and backed away. Her beautiful, pale cheeks were wet with her fallen tears. Her dark eyes twinkled in the dim light. His heart broke to see her like this, to see her helpless, sad, and in despair at their fates. He wished that he could hold her heart in his hands, keep her warm and safe and take her away from this place. He didn't wish to see her die here.

Kamil took a step towards her, and she reached up and touched his cheek. She spoke in the beautiful language of the D'wammish and a chorus of images expressing love and happiness began to appear in his mind. He envisioned a life with her just as they'd talked about. He saw himself gathering water together with her in the morning, brushing down the horses in the afternoon, enjoying dinner on the roof in the evening as they stared up at the night sky. He listened as she spoke to him with his cheek pressed into her palm until her words trailed away and took the beautiful images with them.

Kamil removed Elysandria's hand from his cheek and held it in

both of his. Nothing in the world around them existed. There was only the two of them sharing visions of love and life together in a faraway place. As he stared into her eyes, he thought of all the things that he wanted to tell her. He thought about how much he loved her. She recognized that love in his eyes and smiled as she gently pulled her hand away and took a step backward.

“I wish I could have told you,” she said.

Elysandria turned and placed her hands upon the glass of the reservoir. It lit up as brightly as the Cynosure that Kamil had carried around his neck, and he dimly saw the curves of her silhouette as the light became so unbearable that he had to shield his eyes with his hand.

When the ship lurched beneath his feet, Kamil realized what Elysandria was trying to do. He reached out for her.

“Elys, wait!” he shouted.

Kamil fought the intensity of the light and saw her clothes as they fell away. The reservoir continued to grow ever brighter and began to pulse and spin. He felt for her with his hand as the light became so bright that he had to close his eyes.

“Elysandria!” he shouted.

His fingers finally brushed against the shimmering, spinning glass of the gem before the ship lurched again and he fell to the deck. A dull, scraping sound reverberated along the sides of the hull, and then the ship began to rock and creak from side to side. The people abovedecks were shouting.

As the Roukon burst into the harbor, the veilrunner was already emerging from the cavern and into the sunlight. Glamorfolk scrambled up the masts and released the sails, which caught the wind and allowed the ship to surge across the mists of the veil and away from the besieged fortress. A cheer rose up from the survivors as they watched the mighty fortress of Hollenguard, where all roads met, slowly shrinking away into the distance.

Far below, in the lowest deck of the ship, Kamil sat before the



spinning reservoir and shielded his eyes from the brilliant glare. He reached his hand forward again, but nothing of Elysandria remained.

# Epilogue

The sails were filled with the wind and the veilrunner continued sailing eastward, having held the same course for nearly two weeks. Nijal stood at the forecastle with Asphodel gently holding his arm. His eyes had been burned by the bright light of the Cynosure when it was crushed before him, leaving him nearly blind. He leaned his head to the side and listened as Asphodel explained the beautiful sunrise to him, smiling at her description of the brilliant reds and golds.

Kesrin and Kitarin entertained the crew in the tight living quarters one deck below. Their little sisters danced merrily as Kitarin plucked her lyre and Kesrin played his flute. The music that they brought to the voyage kindled happiness in hearts that had seen far too much blight and destruction.

Commander Belle smiled softly as she watched from a quiet corner of the deck. Despite the horrible battle as they had fled from Hollenguard, there wasn't a single survivor who had later died after being stricken with the Roukon curse. Though food stores were low and they were dangerously short on water, for the first time in a long time the looming threat of the Roukon had passed.

Above, Debo leapt from the rigging to the deck. Many of his people had found that they had a knack for tending to the sails and ropes of the ship, ensuring that its voyage held true. The kinship between them and the men and women of the shire had grown immensely from their experiences together, and there was nothing now that could separate them from one another. They had become a single people, forged through the many trials they had faced.

Debo hopped to the side quickly as a group children nearly bowled him over while they chased one another from aft to stern and back again. Asphodel had to raise her voice.

“What did I tell you about running abovedecks?”

There were choruses of childlike apologies and the game soon

moved down the stairs and into the living quarters, interrupting the music and causing all sorts of havoc. Debo could hear Kesrin shouting angrily, and he smiled as he walked aft with his long feet flapping against the wood.

He saw Kamil standing at the quarterdeck and manning the ship's wheel. He had Elysandria's baldric slung over his shoulder, and her claymore was resting crosswise against his back. Illysidyl stood beside him, and she nodded to Debo as he approached before placing her hand lightly upon Kamil's shoulder.

The young man turned his head and offered a little smile, which she returned. Kamil found that he had to grip the wheel tightly. The mists of the veil had been fighting hard for control of the rudder and he was doing his best to maintain their course while the sun was still in a position to guide them eastward.

"We will be out of water tomorrow," Illysidyl said.

Kamil nodded.

"It is not too late to turn north. With a strong wind we can reach the peninsula in two days to restock our supplies."

"The Roukon will be waiting for us," Kamil said.

"You do not know how far the Ro lands are, Kamil," Illysidyl said gently.

Kamil gripped the wheel tightly, holding his course steady against the current of the mists.

"There is little hope of making it without water," she insisted.

"No," Kamil said, "there is always hope."

Illysidyl sighed and walked away. She headed back across the ship until she stood beside Nijal at the forecandle. Asphodel greeted her with a small wave, and the three of them enjoyed the sunrise together.

Debo watched the Pale Sister go before he quietly stepped up

beside Kamil and lifted a hand to rest it upon his wrist. Kamil realized how tense his muscles had been and did his best to relax. He looked down at the little one, and Debo looked up at him and smiled.

Not a single day had passed since they had escaped Hollenguard on the veilrunner without Kamil having grieved for Elysandria. He insisted on manning the wheel as often as he could manage, determined to see that the ship continued onward and reached the Ro lands so that her sacrifice would not have been in vain.

Sighing heavily, he strained his eyes and looked to the east. With every sunrise he had hoped he would see the telltale signs of land approaching, and as the days had worn on with nothing but the long stretch of the veil spreading out in all directions, his determination had only grown.

From high above them came the whoosh of giant wings as the Empress returned to the ship. She landed upon the crow's nest just as Kamil had constantly begged her not to, sending the ship violently listing to the left and the right. As he struggled to keep the rudder steady, the serpent snaked her great head forward and called out loud enough for all those below her to hear.

“Land ho!” she cried.

## About the Author

I was born in Woodbridge VA, but spent most of my life in the Pacific Northwest. Hollenguard is my first novel and began as a successful attempt at finishing National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) in 2010. Once I'd finished, I was so enamored with the art of storytelling and with these characters that I worked for seven months in the free time between my college classes and my job to finish this story.

I am an independent author and this book is self-published. As such, I don't have the means to hire a marketing team to get the word out, so I'm constantly looking for readers just like you. If you enjoyed my story, please tell your friends! I appreciate any and all feedback. If you feel inclined to do so, reviews on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or any other venue where you received this book are greatly appreciated.

To contact me, or for more information about Hollenguard, its characters, and the world below the Pike, please visit my website at <http://www.sarthurmartin.com>.

Thank you for your support in buying this novel.